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The Taino Heritage of Casabe  
in the Dominican Republic

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the Taino heritage of casabe-- griddle baked flatbread of yuca flour-- which is a traditional food staple in the Dominican Republic.

While griddle baked flatbread of yuca flour may appear a simple topic of study, its persistence as a part of Dominican lifeways leads me to consider two very profound conclusions. First, it suggests the resilience of native Taino heritage in the face of external cultural alternatives, demonstrating how deeply rooted the Taino culture still is in the Dominican Republic. Second, it shows an effective example of how human beings have provided sustenance for each other on a large communal scale, respecting a healthy diet, a healthy society, and a healthy environment.

Today, as global economies and agro-industry find us more and more divorced from the source of our daily bread, we forget our vital connection to the earth. Agricultural practices have become overly mechanized, our soils exhausted with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, our land more devastated by deforestation, erosion, road construction, and urban development, and our food overly processed, commercialized, and lacking in nutrients. Ultimately, our spiritual tie to the land has become more and more unravelled and our communal bonds as human beings have dissolved, making us alienated from both the land we live on as well as from each other.

The indigenous Taino heritage of casabe demonstrates a way of living from which our modern culture has obviously strayed. For the Taino, yuca and casabe were not merely products for human consumption, but were part of the cycle of life itself. Taino food traditions included a spiritual understanding of human life whereby subsistence required a respect for the plants and foods that linked the people to the earth. Strands of this understanding still exist in contemporary Dominican culture, and I hope this paper conveys the profound nature of these indigenous values.

#### TAINO HERITAGE

"Heritage" may be defined loosely as the cultural and biological legacy that contemporary people have carried on from their ancestral past to become a part of their communal identity.

Taino heritage can be found in the Dominican Republic in many forms, including language, agriculture, foodways, medicinal knowledge, craft technologies, architecture, spiritual beliefs, family life, festivals, popular culture, and genetic bloodlines (Ferbel 1995; Garcia Arrevalo 1988, 1990; Vega 1980; Weeks and Ferbel 1994). This Taino heritage has been passed on for generations, much of it originating with the Arahuaican speaking cultures who migrated into the Caribbean from the Orinoco River Valley some 1500 years before Spanish exploration (Weeks and Ferbel 1994). Archaeologists believe a distinct Taino culture had developed in the Caribbean by the year 600 A.D. This means the Native people of the Caribbean had been flourishing in the islands, passing on their heritage for about 900 years before Columbus.

The impact of 15th century European colonization on the Taino was nothing short of devastating, and completely re-structured the trajectory of their Native lifeways. Confronted with deadly foreign diseases, unable to schedule their agricultural planting, forced into systems of social, economic, and political domination, losing rights to land, free expression, and, in many cases, to life itself, the Taino had to find radical ways to survive. Resistance took many forms. Many Taino fought against the intruders, who, unfortunately, had the distinct advantage of coming from a place with a history of guns, swords, horses, dogs, greed, and avarice. Many Taino hid in isolated communities, along 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.

Historian Moya Pons (1992:137) shows that during the period of early Spanish colonization a process of transculturation began to take place whereby Tainos mixed within the Spanish population, together with African slaves, giving rise to a new creole culture. This is substantiated historically, for example, by census records of 1514 which show forty per cent of Spanish men on the island with Indian wives or concubines (Moya Pons 1992:135). Furthermore, interaction between Africans and Indians was also quite common (Garcia Arevalo 1990:275). Ethnohistorian Lynne Guitar (1998) has focused on the historical marginalization of the Taino beginning in the 16th century. While being declared extinct in official documents-- for the purpose of legitimating the importation of African slaves-- references to Indians continued to appear 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 mixed Indians, Africans and Europeans, and 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 in their environments. Naturally, the Taino cultural heritage they had, which represented many generations of knowledge, tradition, and oral history about the land, spoke strongly to their ability to survive. In many ways, this is still true for present-day Dominicans, especially in the agrarian countryside, and it is here that Taino heritage remains the strongest.

Talking with Dominican elders, I am brought to imagine a time of just a few generations ago, when people lived closer to the land. I ask them questions about their Taino heritage and it becomes obvious that the social processes called "modernization," "development," and "globalization," have made Native lifeways less important. Years ago, I am told, there was casabe made in every household. Today, most people eat white bread baked in the city and have lost this part of their heritage. And yet, yuca and casabe still persist, and in many ways may be seen as symbols of cultural resistance against the heavy hand of globalization.

#### YUCA AND CASABE

Yuca, botanically named *Manihot esculenta*, also called cassava or manioc, is a perennial shrub that has a high yield of edible, starchy roots. Originally cultivated in South America, yuca grows well in tropical climates and can withstand both drought and hurricane. The plant prefers dry soil and does not necessarily need a high humus content to grow well. In fact, studies have shown that the starch content and size of the roots increases in poorer soils (Roosevelt 1980:120-123). The only condition that hinders yuca growth is overly wet soils or flooding because the roots rot easily.

Yuca is sown from a section of the center stalk of a mature plant. It takes about ten months for the roots to grow to sufficient size for harvesting but can stay in the ground for up to two years without rotting. This quality of natural storage obviously makes yuca invaluable as a staple food. Furthermore, it may be life saving after a hurricane, suffering relatively little damage as compared to maize or other staple food sources. It is no wonder that the Taino's ancestors brought yuca into the Caribbean as they migrated there some 2000 years ago.

Two kinds of yuca exist, bitter and sweet, and are designated by the amount of cyanogenic glucosides present in their roots. When sweet yuca is boiled it has the consistency of a dense potato. It is very high in carbohydrates and low in fat and protein. Yuca is delicious boiled in stews and soups. Bitter yuca must be processed and leached of its poisonous acids before eating. A process of grating, leeching, drying, sifting, and baking makes the bitter yuca edible. This is the process of making casabe bread. Casabe resists spoilage and offers a high yielding and versatile food. Like boiled sweet yuca, casabe bread of bitter yuca flour is high in carbohydrates and low in fat and protein. With a protein and fat complement like fish, together with other vegetables for vitamins and roughage, it makes a very healthy meal.

Casabe griddle shards are found in the Caribbean by archaeologists at the earliest occupation levels of ceramic age agriculturalist people originating from South America. Other artifacts that indicate casabe production include grating stones. Other tools and materials in the casabe baking process were made of organic materials which have not survived to the present, so we must rely on ethnographic analogy and historical references by Spanish chroniclers to infer the original Taino methods of casabe

culture, and on the work of motivated individuals to critically examine their heritage and identify it as an integral part of their community.

My vision of Taino heritage, which is both anthropological and personal, is based on the idea that human beings are active participants in the defining of their cultural identity and in the structuring of their social lives. Culture is not simply a static list of ingredients written in a book or dictated by a national agenda, but is part of a complex and dynamic process of creation and re-creation by human individuals living in their communities in each present moment. In this way, every cultural form, ritual, or expression has a unique and meaningful history that has come to us through the actions of generations of ancestors, sharing their stories and teaching their ways, and it is up to the actions of individuals in the present to identify, assess, and move this heritage from the past into the present, with a critical eye toward its relevance for the future.

The Taino understood the importance of yuca and casabe; it was their daily bread. From the earth the people were nourished with life. I believe, by looking critically at the composition of history and culture in the present, we will provide more vision and strength for our human capacity to live together on this one earth in the future.

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