

A LOOK AT THE INDIGENOUS HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO

THE TAINO: WE ARE STILL HERE

by Bobby Gonzalez

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"The indigenous inhabitants of the island of Boriken [renamed Puerto Rico by the Spanish] have been extinct for several hundred years." This statement has been repeated so often that most people believe it. It may surprise the general public to know that we the Taino are so extinct that we are organized in New York City, in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in Phoenix, Arizona, in Los Angeles, California, in St. Petersburg, Florida, and in Boriken.

Taino women and men have served on the Board of Directors of the Indian Law Alliance and the New York City American Indian Community House. A Taino is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Indian Center in Pittsburgh. We have been active in the Native American community for a number of years and are accepted as Native Americans. Why then are we considered extinct? It began in the year 1492, the year of the encounter between the European and the Taino.

The story of the rape of the Taino People and Taino Land is painful to recount. Those who were not butchered were enslaved. A mass suicide unprecedented in world history transpired. Possibly thousands of our ancestors took their own lives rather than live a slow death under the yoke of the invaders. Mothers killed their own children in order to spare them a life of misery.

Yet a number of us survived. Some of us fled to the Carib people of the Lesser Antilles. They gave us refuge. Some of us might have gone to Florida where a contingent of Taino had already settled among the Calusa years before. Still others hid in the mountains of the interior of the island of Boriken.

Historians say that we were all exterminated within fifty years of the arrival of the Spaniards in the Americas. Accordingly, we should have disappeared by the year 1542. The evidence to the contrary, however, is overwhelming.

In the late 1590s, the city of San Juan was attacked and occupied by the English Earl of Cumberland. When the Spaniards retook the city in 1599, they were astonished to find the town populated by Indians. The Spanish colonists had fled to the mountains to hide.

The official census of Puerto Rico of 1799 stated that there were 2,300 Indians living on the island. The census of 1803 indicated that there were no Indians on the island—zero. What happened was that the government arbitrarily transferred the Indians to the "pardo" column in the population count. The authorities no longer wished to recognize the Taino as a separate racial entity. They simply considered us one of the pardo, the coloreds.

The United States invaded Boriken in 1899. During the following year the U.S. Department of War issued a "Report on the Census of Puerto Rico, 1899." The report contained the following statement by a Captain W.S. Schuyler, "While work was being done on the roads, I had occasion to watch crowds of 700 or 800 men gathered about the pay tables at Las Marías, La Vega and Añasco. The frequency of the aboriginal type was very noticeable . . . At San German I noticed a woman whose color, hair, and features were true Indian as seen in the southwest of the United States."

There is not one government in the Caribbean which acknowledges that the Taino still exist as a distinct cultural group. To do so would open up a Pandora's box.