

# In the Cuban heartland, Elian and remembrances of Ingrid

**By Jose Barreiro, *Taino Journal*,  
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*HAVANA, Cuba - The Hotel Nacional in Havana opens up to a wide and enchanting bay that has seen much conflictive history.*

*Ruins from the Maine, the American ship whose mysterious explosion in 1898 moved the United States to go to war against Spain over Cuba, mark calm waters on this day. But the open hostility of the past 40 years between this embattled country and the United States continues unabated.*

*Flanked by centuries-old Spanish fortresses, the Bay of Havana features the Malecón, an elegant, concrete boardwalk that snakes for miles along the rocky shore. On a recent early morning you could see a crowd of thousands of Cuban schoolchildren gathered just down the Malecón from the Nacional. Fidel Castro sat near the podium, surrounded by Cuban intellectuals. They were dedicating a new statute of José Martí, the major Cuban independence martyr, and the children were reciting, from memory, verses from the hero's poetry.*

*Martí touches a deep chord with Cubans of all races and creeds. His bust perches in every school and institute on the island. The Martí of the new statue carries a young boy on one arm while his other arm extends toward the former U.S. Embassy, pointing an accusatory finger. The school children, as young as 6, were impressively masterful in their recitations.*

*In Cuba, more and more, it is the children taking the podium now on the case of Eliancito, the 6-year-old Cuban rescued from the Florida Straights who has become symbol and shield in the ongoing saga of the divided Cuban community. Every one of the country's 169 municipalities has held rallies for Elian.*

*U.S. policy makers take note: these kids and their message are irresistible - to adults and to their own peers.*

*I witnessed the scene recently while in the country to interview Panchito Ramirez Rojas, a mountain cacique of the Indocuban community at Caridad de los Indios. The little plaza on the bay was where at first spontaneously and then with increasing regularity and logistical support from the government, crowds of Havaneros have gathered to protest keeping young Elian in the United States.*

*On sculptured concrete abutments, copper plaques are inscribed that commemorate heroes who made contributions to social causes.*

*A speaker that morning, Eliades Acosta Matos, director of the Cuban National Library, mentioned that the abutments will include plaques of important American Indians. That caught my attention.*

*Later I spoke to Acosta at his office. Contrary to popular opinion in the American media, Cuban intellectual life is quite rich. (Acosta is of a circle of leading Cuban intellectuals who are accessible to reasonable delegations and who exercise sophisticated influences in Havana.)*

*Acosta discussed with me the possibility of nominating Ingrid Washinawatok, the Menominee activist killed last year in Colombia, for a special plaque at the new memorial. Ali El-Issa, Ingrid's husband, was consulted and now her name stands in nomination. Ingrid Washinawatok studied in Cuba in 1980. In recent years she had visited the eastern end of the island to participate in the annual Indigenous Legacies of the Caribbean conferences.*

*Among Ingrid's many Cuban friends is Panchito Ramirez, the mountain cacique I interviewed extensively on this and earlier trips. There is a growing understanding in Cuba about the survival of Taino-descendant people in various parts of the country. The assertion of non-extinction in Cuba is important to a widespread interest in Taino-guajiro-jivaro cultures among Indigenous descendants of the Greater Caribbean islands.*

*The case of Elian was visible everywhere. Even at the cacique's humble and remote mountain bohio, 1,000 miles across the island from Havana, there hangs a small poster of the water-blessed Cuban boy. Overlooking the batey or plaza of five thatched-roof homes, where his great uncle Opublio was reciting hundred-year-old coplas for the visitors, Elian was an immediate item on Panchito's mind.*

*Give my greetings to the Indian people of North America, he said first off.*

*And please, ask for their help in getting Eliancito back to our beloved Cuba.*

*For Panchito, who claimed to have meditated on the subject, young Elian was anointed by the Mother of Waters, who kept him safe in the waters. That boy is a gift; he is Cuba, my friend. We damage the innocence of our nation the same way as we could hurt him, with angers that belong elsewhere. By the Virgin of Cobre (a Cuban deity), he is a big lesson to Cubans. That boy was saved for a reason. But spiritually and in family, he belongs here.*

*Panchito's community of some 2,000 people is one of several documented Cuban Indigenous-descendant population enclaves along the eastern mountains. Chroniclers, from Father Bartolome de las Casas, an early human rights advocate, to José Martí wrote about the Cuban Indian population in the Sierras.*

*In the 20th century, geographer Antonio Nuñez Jimenez and the eminent anthropologist, Dr. Manuel Rivero de la Calle, reported and studied the survival of Cuban Indian communities. Nevertheless, the myth of the extinction of Cuban Indians persists. This was a major concern for the cacique.*

*Tell the world that we are still here, very Indian, very Cuban, very ready to do for our country, he said. And this is not out of sheer good luck. Our elders knew to protect our songs and our culture of the earth up here in the mountains.*

*The Castro Revolution has brought schools and clinics to the mountains, Ramirez emphasized. My children read and write, one niece is even a doctor, he said. Panchito is a well-known healer to local folks. In a short walk in the woods, he and other elders identified more than 50 medicinal plants. Panchito and the Taino cultural group, Guama, are a featured workshop at the annual Indigenous Legacies conference.*

*Panchito and his life partner, Reyna, remembered Ingrid Washinawatok fondly. We have Ingrid in our prayers and she is with us in ceremony, he said. And Reyna added, Please tell her people in the North how much we loved her and how much we miss her.*

*Panchito was happy to hear of Ingrid's consideration for a plaque at the plaza in Havana. You let us know when that happens, he said. We will go from here, on foot if necessary, to honor Ingrid and remember her smile full of heart.*

# **We are not extinct: Cuba's first nations**

**By Dr. Jose Barreiro, American Indian Program,  
Cornell University, 17 May 1997**

In these eastern mountains of Cuba, region of Baracoa, Guatanamo Province, there are several enclaves of indigenous community culture that have survived 500 years of colonization. This remote and yet culturally important area of Cuba has been characterized by its historically rural quality and its major historical import to Cuban movements of autochthonous liberation.

While the continued existence of several Native populations appears in the deep scientific record (Marti, Rousse, Arrom, Rivero de la Calle, Nuez), the assertion of complete extinction of Taino Indians in the Caribbean became commonplace in the academy throughout the twentieth century. Recently, however, some of these isolated Native groups have begun to represent themselves within Cuba and to communicate with other Native groups around the hemisphere. Cuban and international documentation was initiated, with several articles appearing in scientific journals. Most prominently, the Taino community at Caridad de Los Indios, near Guantanamo, has retained various Native dances and songs, as well as considerable oral history and understanding of ecological relationships. There are as well, Native populations near Bayamo, Santiago and Punta Maisi in this eastern-most triangle of Cuba. As a result of the indigenous revitalization now in process, the several Native-based community enclaves are now reaching out to each other to generate an awareness of the remaining Taino identity and culture in the area.

While the Taino-descendant population is not dominant, this is a region of Cuba that has maintained the most sustainable indigenous agricultural traditions (the conuco system) and features an old Cuba flavor. The agricultural base of the region is largely self-sufficient farming, with families maintaining gardens and small animals. The Baracoa-Guantanamo region is a great living microcosm of the Cuban ethnogenesis, rooted in the tri-raciality of Indigenous (Taino), Spanish, and African peoples. The natural history of the region offers nature walks in tropical forests, cultural exchanges with Native communities,

ocean fishing and snorkelling and cultural/historical tours tracing the route of Columbus

*We Are Not Extinct: Cuba's First Nations American Studies:  
The Elggua Project Internet Newsletter*

*Respectfully yours,  
Ms. Beverly Carey Torres, Secretary*

*The Taino Inter-Tribal Council Inc.  
<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/taino/>*

*The Taino Indigenous People Of The Caribbean & Florida  
We The Taino People Who Discovered Columbus In 1492*