

**Higuayagua Taino of the Caribbean**

Return from Extinction Surviving Paper Genocide

**Different paths towards the same destination**

Most historians believe that a horrible, complete Genocide took place in the Caribbean Islands shortly after the Spaniards arrived in 1492. It is said that by 1565, every Taino man, woman and child had perished forever. While Taino women did in fact “intermarry” with both Spanish and African males (Taino men having been worked to death), this happened so long ago that Indian phenotypes and genotypes had long since been “washed away”. This version, in fact nearly verbatim, is what Caribbean peoples have been told since the islands liberated themselves from Spain. In order to create National Identities, the Native peoples had to be eradicated. It is said further that any claims of Taino Indian ancestry are due in part to either romanticism or denial of negritude! History books paint a vivid picture of the destruction of the Indies, warfare, slavery, starvation, mass suicide, and according to the priest Bartolome de las Casas WONTON MURDER, all played a part in the demise of this race of people

Despite these historical assertions, there are literally thousands upon thousands of people every day re-identifying with the Indigenous peoples of the Greater Antilles. From Jamaica to Puerto Rico and all the islands in between, more and more people are discovering what countless others already knew; the “extinction of the Taino” is a myth. How did this myth begin? Why, despite claims of total extinction, did some Caribbean peoples, seemingly out of the blue, begin to identify as Indians?

Japanese documentary photographer, Haruka Sakaguchi asked herself this very question. Being a true researcher, with tons of questions, she embarked on a mission to question these people themselves, rather than rely on “social scientists” that may or may not have their own biases in turn upholding the historical paradigm. The answers she received were varied, showing that there are different levels to this identity, making it quite complex and not as easy as ‘wanting to be Indian”. Clearly however, all the different paths undertaken by these subjects led to the same destination: A world where the Taino peoples of the Caribbean survive the colonial period, passing down intangible oral traditions like seeds ready to sprout….and they have. These are their stories……..

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| I come from a small rural town in the Dominican Republic. From the age of 5, I heard stories of brave Indian relatives or relatives with special knowledge, from my grandmother, mother, aunts and uncles. These stories would just spring up in conversation, there was nothing special about them, they were just matter of fact. Undoubtedly there were also stories of Haitian family or Spanish as well, but it was the Indio that captured my attention the most. My journey into Taino identity may have begun in a small Dominican town, but it was in the United States where it culminated. It was here where I had to defend it without truly understanding why. Everywhere I turned, from teachers, fellow students, people from all walks of life and in every single book I could find information in; The Taino Indians were long gone, they were extinct. This rendered my family lore as nothing more than fanciful fairy tales. Caribbean Indigenous peoples were written out of history. This is the essence of Paper Genocide. It was frustrating, yes, but I was persistent, after all I could see Taino people in the faces of many Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Haitians and Dominicans. I knew that one day, somehow, someway, the Taino people would rise again. This is exhibit is one of the many stories of how the Taino people began writing ourselves back into history. | **Kacike**  **Jorge Baracutei Estevez**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| I was born into a family that identifies as Taino and from a young age, I heard stories and learned about the musical instruments that are used. I have identified as Taino my whole life and have proudly told people about my family. I was raised to be proud of who I am and of my ancestors, and I am proud to be Taino. | Kayla Anarix Vargas Estevez  Dominican/Puerto Rican |

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| Did I always know I am Taino? No, it's not because I denied my heritage,  but because I was conditioned by the colonizers to believe that my ancestors all died within 73 years of contact.  I was denied my identity, told my mother's stories of bohios, conucos, and Casabe were just remnants of the past, adapted by the Spanish and Africans that came later. I always knew I was different, and that is what sparked a need to understand that difference.I found my heritage and reclaim my identity. I embrace ancestors and my culture. We have been here and we are here to stay. | **Valerie Tureiyari Vargas**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| My name is Gypsie RunningCloud, and I am The Behike Atenua, The Principle Medicine Person, for The Community of Higuayagua. I have identified as Indigenous all of my life; but in my later adult years, my self-identifying term has shifted from solely, “Taíno,” to “Lokonoaíri,” a term meaning “The Island Peoples,”a term that is inclusive of the various Tribal Lineages that encompass the Indigenous Caribbean. As I entered young adulthood, I made the conscious decision to address the Intergeneration Trauma in my Family that resulted in the overt repression of our Indigeneity - I grew my hair out - hair that had been forcibly cut from the time I was a child; I publicly acknowledged My/Our Indigenous Heritage in a variety of ways; I began the process of supporting recovery efforts to rebuild Our Traditions, Language, Ceremonies, and Cultures; and, when my greatest Tekina, my greatest Teacher, my greatest medicinal Teacher, my Maternal Kwetwe, my Grandma Yuya, stated her deepest fears that soldiers would come to abduct me, I looked at this face of this gorgeous Elder -this gorgeous Human Being who had loved me & our Family so very Fiercely & Devotedly - and I said to my Kwetwe, to my Grandmother, “I will face them.” And I have never hesitated, nor looked back, since that very moment. I live every day in Honor of The Old Ones. | In The Spirit of Our Ancestors, Ajíacabo Wa’Hebeyono  We Speak To You, Our Ancestors. Wa’Lokonoaíri  We Are The Island Peoples    **Gyspsie Runningcloud**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| I am Taino, but as I grew up, I never knew. The Taino identity in my family was mostly been erased to the point that we just have family traditions. It just happens that these “Family Traditions” were Taino traditions. It took me realizing there was something missing inside me and searching. I met a few people and slowly I realized that I it was not something missing, just forgotten. My indigeneity comes from re-awakening the memory of my heritage, of my people. I am Taino. | **Eric Guatiguana Alexie Cruz**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| Taino Nuguya I am one with who I am as a man of the earth. I move with the flow of the universe.  My passion is for our people, for the people of the earth, to have a better understanding that we, the Taino, are here. We have moved through our period of loss as a people and now we must move together as a nation with unity. Beyond physical, it is embedded in my soul. I was born Taino and I will remain Taino through my children- | **Manuel Arubana Borerro**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| Ever since I can remember, my grandmother has instilled in me that I am Taino. She has truly taught me the Taino way of life. I have amazing childhood memories of cooking traditional foods and making traditional medicine. The teachings of my grandmother sparked a desire for me to learn more about Taino culture on a deeper level. In my search for a Taino language teacher, I discovered an entire community focused on rewriting our history. I have met so many great leaders, educators and artist along this journey. Our indigenous art inspired me to organize an art exhibition with various Taino artist. Further weaving the web of interconnection and healing. I am grateful for my Indigenous family. The songs, stories, music, art and foods are essential for keeping our culture alive. It means everything to me to be able to pass these traditions down for future generations and it is a way to heal and honor our ancestors. Being Taino is sacred! I am honoring my lineage! We are still here! | **Mercedes Anakachi Garcia**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| I am proud Wapichan Taruma descendant of the deep South of Rupununi of Guyana. We are living descendants of the ancient Arawak peoples which spread from South America into the Caribbean. All Arawak speaking are related. I was invited and accepted into the Higuayagua Taino family and accepted fully. This is the Arawak way. | **Berlinda Persaud**  **Guyana** |

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| Many elements have guided me along this path starting from childhood spent mostly in nature, deeply connected to waters, the moon, stars, Mother Earth, plants and creatures. My parents, diversely spiritual, respected different ways, attended protests, Pow Wow, vended festivals. Our Taino roots originate from El Cibao, Licey of the island Kiskeya. Growing up in the states Taino culture was sprinkled throughout our home on walls and shelves, art, books, cemis, Taino Relics. My father practiced his own forms of smudging, drumming and healing. Our line possesses gifts of music, medicine, farming, divinity, healing, visions, and arts but with deaths, distractions and broken links, clarity and specifics were lacking. Spirit gave signals and a pull to dive deeper, to connect with ancient roots, a sense of divine duty. This is a lifelong journey of revealing truths in layers, of connecting to nature, realms, spirits and ancestors. They guided me to soul family. Many visions I received years ago have been fulfilled at Taino events, illuminating the sacred path to my people. I hold deep gratitude to the Teachers and preservers of our medicine, language, ceremony, songs, dances and traditions. With the strength and resilience of our ancestors blood that dances through our veins we are the planters of the ancient cosmic seeds of life. I am Taino and that is a sacred gift. | **Melody C. Garrido**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| What Taino means to me. I myself identify as Taino from my Puerto Rican bloodline . I’m a Second generation American from the main land USA. Growing up American I wasn’t told my peoples history unlike now I’m finding my roots as a Taino woman. Being Taino means I have a rich history of agriculture, knowledge , spirituality and Community . Being part of a rich group of native peaceful people from the Caribbean and great Antilles. Has giving me more then just a face of people from my past but hope to learn and bring our peoples history from the dead in history books. We are an ever changing yet Constant in our blood line in each generation. Being Taino is having past, present and future | **Angie Bejar**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| Yo soy Taino. I am Taino. To be part of this culture is not just to understand where we come from but, where will are going as a people. My ancestors resides from Dominican Republic. The first island to find Columbus at sea. Taino to me is strong, kind, knowledgeable, powerful and everlasting in our blood. We are rising once more to take our place in history. We are a great people part of a great indigenous family. | **Sam Velasquez**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| Scott D. Hi I’m Scott and I am 7 years old. Taino to me is family and friends. I like being Taino like my mom and grandma. I like the music we play with friends and family. Being Taino is fun. | Scott Bejar  Dominican/Puerto Rican |

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| I’m Juliet Diaz, Taino name Bawainaru, which means Ocean Woman. An indigenous Taino MedicineWoman (Behique) and seer. Specifically from the island of Cuba. Being Taino isn’t something that came easy, many people believe we are an extinct peoples so there was always some form of defending my identity, my culture, and my ancestors with others who believe the colonizers lies. I find it difficult to keep my ancestors voices quiet and so have chosen the path of activism where I can voice, educate and bring justice to our peoples history and acknowledgement of our existence. We are strong, We are resilient, and we will reclaim our power! I am, Taino. | **Juliet Bawainaru Diaz**  **Cuba** |

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| Being Taino to me is a link to my ancestors and the island they called home. My father would talk about his great grandmother and other family members were taino and it always made me want to learn more about Tainos.  I always felt bad on how the American Indians were treated but I never thought about how our Taino ancestors were the first to encounter the Europeans and see what ugliness they were capable of. The one thing I have learned is that we are a strong people who were able to survive those times and now we need to bring awareness to our people so they can feel pride and show our young ones that they come from strong cultural roots. | **Willlie Colon**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| I identify as taino from being raised and taught to identify with my indigenous blood by my great grandmother, my grandmother and my father who all identify as Taino from Mayaguez puerto rico.  I always knew of my family's indigenous roots just from looking at my grandmother and great grandmothers faces. This led me as a boy to ask my father about our family and why did they looked so different from myself and others i would see in school. My father then taught me about our taino blood and the history Puerto Rico. As i got older i learned more and didn't like how our islands were invaded and the people were said to be extinct by Spaniards but yet my elders looked so distinctly indigenous and beautiful. Knowing my roots and the terrible history of the greater antillies islands i set to read and find out all i could about the existing Taino culture and the people. This great desire lead me to the museum of the American Indian in lower Manhattan here found kasike jorge Estevez and jumped at the opportunity to learn and participate in our Taino culture. | **Luis Vasquez**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| The myth of the extinction of the Taino started with the arrival of Western Europeans to our shores. My people suffered through torture, rape, loss of their land, history, Culture, language and mass genocide, by the hands of our colonizers. We survived through it all because of our strong spirituality. The Ancestors gave us the cloak of invisibility. So we gathered all of our people and became the original ghost people. Standing right in front of their very eyes they could not see us. Protected by Yukahu, the spirit of all spirits. Guided by our ancestors the cloak of invisibility was lifted and a call went out to all of our people to wake up. One  by one those that heard the call made the journey back home. We are the people of the rainforest and mountains of the Carribean, the children of the Yuka. Reawakening and struggling to take back everything we lost. Our journey has been a long one, but we are back... | **Tekina**  **Tomas Baibrama-el Gonzalez**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| The first time knowing about my Taino ancestry was from my mom when I was about 5 I asked her what was a Puerto Rican she said “I dont know Papi, Indios!” All my life I’m thinking Indians from India. Until I got older she meant indigenous, when I was about 15 -16 years of age I started researching on Caribbean History and its where I first saw the word “Taino”. Being Taino is something personal to me it’s Transcendental, its spiritual. Honoring my ancestors is a Amorousness feeling. | **Rene Perez de Liciaga**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| **My name is Mayreny Santiago and I am 18 years old. I have been identifying as Taino for 2 years now. What led me to identify as Taino was simply learning more about myself. I didn't know who I was, where my people were from or that they even existed until I met Jorge Estevez and the Higuayagua group who educated me on my roots. I identify as Taino because I refuse to keep being a product of my ancestor's colonization and oppression. I refuse to allow us to be erased from history again.** | **Mayreni Santiago**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| When I was a child my parents used to send my siblings and I to the island every summer, until I was in my late teens. My abuela made sure I knew we were not Puerto Rican, but Boricua Indian. I shyd away from identifying this way after being told over and over by others that we are extinct. When I was sixteen, I watched a documentary about the caribbean natives. In it I learned there was a scientist that studied  the islands dna and realised that 61% of all Puerto Ricans carry indigenous genomes. This truth serged through my body and shook awake every cell, as my grandmother's words echoed all around. This in itself was healing. We are still here. | **Kiriaki Aletheia**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| Age:26  How long have you been identifying as Taino: Since I was 18 yrs old.  What led you to identify as Taino:    A few things lead up to me identifying with Taino. I originally grew up without my father nor asked about him growing up. Being native on my mothers side as well along with being raised  with my culture and language ,I never saw a reason to know the other side of me.  What I would say initially sparked my journey on seeking my lineage on my fathers side was a friend. His professor in college had given his class an assignment to look for the origin on where their last name came from. It was since then, my fathers last name and lineage made me curious. Eventually When my brother graduated college one of my uncles and I were discussing our lineage on my moms side. He then told me that I was mixed and that my father is native as well. At this point in my life I had zero knowledge on where my family came from except the fact they were from New York and North Carolina. I later took a Dna test becoming even more curious to find out I stem from mixed tribal ancestry from my fathers side with Taino being one of them. After discovering my last name originally translates Columbus, I had to ask myself could I really stem from the lineage of the first tribe in the americas that were first contacted by Europeans? And the results were a definite yes, I do. After that the rest was history,and  I've been identifying as Taino since. | **Kacey Akapa Supay**  **Puerto Rico** |

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| In 2010, my maternal grandmother passed on. With her, she took all the intangible memories and culture as well as generational teachings. I realized that I had not immersed myself enough in her teachings and I desperately needed to learn. I remember a purple stone on her dresser, the only thing of hers I wanted. I scolded my familia as they fought for her belongings “ you cannot take her things into the void! I will only take her DNA and this stone, that is all!” But I also felt like I had never been taught anything. But I was determined. I dove into books, devouring countless numbers of them. The more I read, the more I realized she had indeed taught me many many things!  I also participated in Pan-Indigenous events until I encountered others like me. Others who also identified as Taino. Despite being told we were extinct, we puched forward, determined to breathe new life into an ancient identity, one denied to us by the colonizers.  The unwillingness to openly impart these lessons and name them as Taino, Indio or even just indigenous were evident of the continued fear of punishment from the Colonizing governments that took hold of our people. This is why I have reclaimed my identity as Taino. This is why I work to uncover the forgotten. This is why I am adamant about rebuilding our family’s history and giving my children a Legacy they can proudly pass down to their children. We Are Still Here | **Maritza Feliciano-Potter Puerto Rico** |

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| Since I was a child I felt very sad because they made me believe that my indigenous ancestors had become extinct. But, every time I was near indigenous people I felt a closeness that I could not understand. I also experienced a special connection to nature, forests, rivers and stones. Being in nature produced a nostalgia in me I could not understand nor could I shake off. Today I know that extinction is nothing but a myth created to disenfranchise our people, to dim the light of our people but we do not accept that any longer! I am Taino, we are here and we are here to stay! I am no longer sad, I am happy, I am alive, I have found myself…..I am Coacibani from Kiskeya and proud member of the Higuayagua Taino people! | **Juana Dioni Pena Torres**  **COACIBANI**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| What led me to identify as Taino:  From a very young age I knew that something was off from the Caribbean cultural history that I read about. The stories didn’t resonate. I didn’t identify with the European or African side much and knew that the pictures I grew up seeing of my relatives didn’t match the folks that came much later to the islands. As a little girl I would stare at my father's face and ask him why he looked like the men in my American Indian history books. I pressed my elders for answers, proof, stories of the past , worked on my genealogy non-stop and then finally did a DNA test to confirm all along what I thought and heard.  It was the confirmation I needed. Although blood quantum shouldn't be the only indicator of being native. Upon receiving my results I wanted to call my college professor that told me I couldn’t be Taino because there were none left and tell her how wrong she was but didn’t.  Seeing all of my native DNA in double digits was the final confirmation that I needed. I still get stares when I tell folks that I am Taino but I’m older now and more confident. There is no doubt. I am Taino and will always be. | **Ms. Michelle Anne Bangash (Maiden Name: Cruz)­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­**  **Dominican Republic** |

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| As a child who spent much of my childhood on Boriken, I could not quite get a grasp on who we were.  My family referred to my Abuelo Gelo, my great grandfather, as "indio," yet no one else /lseemed to identify with that label.  I could not understand why he was "indio," but the rest of us were just Boricua.  As I got older, I sought out the truth- about the Taino, the myth of extinction, the effects of colonization, and our real history. Today, much of my family lovingly refers to me as "la india," or says, "ella es Taino," yet they themselves do not personally identify as Taino/indigenous. | **Jessie Hurani Marrero**  **Puerto Rico** |
| Haruka Sakaguchi is a Japanese documentary photographer based in New York City. She was born in Osaka, Japan and immigrated to the US with her parents when she was three months old. Haruka's documentary work focuses on cultural identity and sense of place, and has been published on The New York Times, National Geographic, TIME, The New Yorker, Newsweek, PDN and Buzzfeed. Her work has been exhibited at the Nobel Peace Center and the Annenberg Space for Photography, among other institutions. |  |

Higuayagua Taino was founded in January 21 2011. It has roots however in the Taino movement since it began nearly 35 years ago. The group’s commitment and focus is to the preservation of the Indigeneity of the Caribbean and other lands where the Arawakan peoples live.

The group’s membership is pan-Caribbean with members hailing from Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Guyana.

Focusing heavily on culture, the group explores

History

Identity

Oral Tradition

Material Culture

Customs

Indigenous Agricultural ways

Spirituality

Language

And Genetic Legacies

Comparing rural traditions with that of their Taino ancestors as well as their modern Arawakan kinsmen in Northern South America.

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