

# Taíno Identity

## What Does it Mean to be Taíno?

BY TAÍNA

In 2018, scientists used the tooth of an ancient woman who'd lived at least 500 years before Columbus' arrival in the Americas, discovered in a cave on the Bahamian island of Eleuthera, to "sequence the first complete ancient human genome from the Caribbean<sup>1</sup>". This discovery along with a subsequent study, revealing roughly 60% of Puerto Ricans hold living Taíno DNA, debunked the myth of Taíno extinction taught in contemporary history books. "By the start of 2019 more than 26 million consumers had added their DNA to four leading commercial ancestry and health databases<sup>2</sup>." Since then, a rapidly growing number of people of Caribbean descent have been making the discovery that their own blood holds the last genetic vestiges of the Taíno people, who until now, had been dismissed, erased, and whose stories had been ignored as a casualty of colonization. Thousands of people flock to the internet every month, in search of answers that echo the same questions, "What does it mean to be Taíno?"

In the 2006 *Perspectives on Politics* article, "Identity as a Variable", Herrera et al defined identity as "a social category that varies along two dimensions-content and contestation."<sup>3</sup> The article goes on to further define content as the description of the collective identity, and constitution as the degree of agreement within a group about that content. This definition breaks the content of social identities into four, non-mutually exclusive types:

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient genome study identifies traces of indigenous "Taíno" in present-day Caribbean populations. (2018, February 19). Retrieved September 30, 2020, from <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/ancient-genome-study-identifies-traces-of-indigenous-Taíno-in-present-day-caribbean-populations>

<sup>2</sup> Regalado, A. (2020, June 18). More than 26 million people have taken an at-home ancestry test. Retrieved from <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/02/11/103446/more-than-26-million-people-have-taken-an-at-home-ancestry-test/>

<sup>3</sup> Abdelal, R., Herrera, Y., Johnston, A., & McDermott, R. (2006). Identity as a Variable. *Perspectives on Politics*, 4(4), 695-711. Retrieved August 20, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20446277> , page 696

- Constitutive norms: the formal/informal rules of membership
- Social purposes / shared goals
- Relational comparisons: what the group is not, the way it views other identity groups (especially in cases where those views about other groups critical to defining this identity); and
- Cognitive models, worldview, concepts of political/ material interests that are shaped by a particular identity.

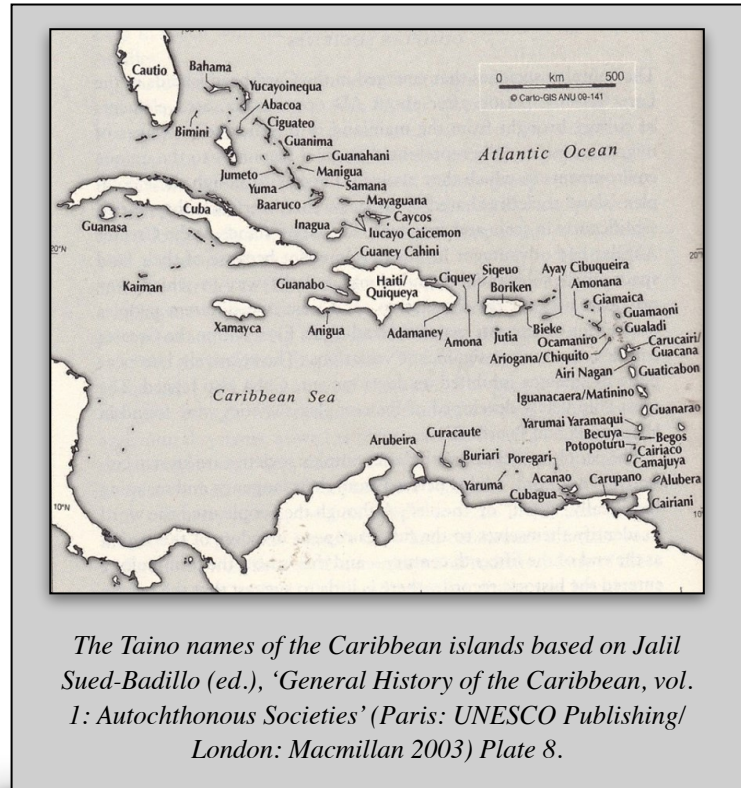
Jorge Baracutei Estevez, Taíno culture expert, one of the curators of the most visited exhibit at the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian "*Taino: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean*, and Cacike Atunwa of the Higuayagua Caribeño Taínos, asserts, each of these markers within Taíno cultural identity stem from geography. "Within this geography, there are resources. This in turn creates customs, that in time become tradition." He says. "My ancestors learned how to extract the poison from the bitter yucca in order to prepare *casabe* bread. This custom and tradition is common in the Circum-Caribbean region". These are traditions handed down orally from generation to generation, with little to no written records, which is why they are often ignored as evidence of Taíno culture. Even the Taíno wikipedia page, as of the writing of this article, repeats the extinction myth, and refers to the Taínos in the past tense. The consequence of the historic erasure of the Taínos has been the loss of cultural knowledge within the community, which contemporary Taínos are working to rebuild and reclaim. "In other words, our culture was blown into a million pieces like a puzzle, but the pieces are still here."

The Taíno, sometimes referred to as the Island Arawak, is a division of the larger Arawakan family, Estevez explains, specifically the Maipurean Ta-Arawakan. "The late professor, Dr. Irving Rouse, arguably the father of Caribbean archaeology, rightly theorized that Taíno people had migrated to the islands," using sea faring canoes to island hop from South America and reached the Greater Antilles roughly 4000 years ago,<sup>4</sup> and were the first people with whom Christopher Columbus made contact with in 1492.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Cacike Estevez, while Rouse theorized that there had already been archaic peoples living in the Greater Antilles, which he Cassimiroid (due to similarities between spear points in Central America, specifically Honduras; Cuba; and the Dominican Republic), however ancient DNA samples analyzed by Dr. Hannes Schroeder, and another by Dr. David Reich, suggest that all but one migration into the Caribbean were South American and Arawakan.

It is worth noting that “prior to the arrival of the chroniclers (Las Casas, Columbus and Pané), they lacked a common name for the entire culture; instead, each island or locality had a specific name, like the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, who were known as the *Borinquen*. Those in the Bahamas called themselves the *Lucayo*.”<sup>5</sup> This argument, along with etymological ones that attempt to deconstruct the meaning of the word Taíno itself, and its usage over time, is often used by Taíno -deniers to dismiss the persistence of Taíno culture post-contact, providing excellent examples of the consequences of the Taíno extinction myth over the last centuries. However, as Estevez



*The Taíno names of the Caribbean islands based on Jalil Sued-Badillo (ed.), 'General History of the Caribbean, vol. 1: Autochthonous Societies' (Paris: UNESCO Publishing/ London: Macmillan 2003) Plate 8.*

argues, it is important to remember that “when un-contacted Amazonian tribes are located, we don’t expect them to identify as Indians. That concept is foreign to them, although they are in fact the closest to [pre]contact periods peoples we have left today.”

Although the word tribe is used casually, Taínos aren’t exactly a tribal people in the traditional sense of the word. Taíno islands were separated into *cacicazgos* (chiefdoms) which were governed regionally by *Cacikeno* (chiefs) who were in turn lead by a *Cacike Atunwa* (Grand High First Chief), and lived in *yukayekes* (communities).

According to Estevez, “In ancient times you were either *naboria*, which means “worker,” or you were part of tribal leadership. These tribal roles continue to vary from tribe to tribe for the modern Taíno, which, as

<sup>5</sup> Ramsharan, S. (2004). *Caribbean Prehistoric Domestic Architecture: A Study of Spatio-Temporal Dynamics and Acculturation* (Unpublished master's thesis). Florida State University College of Arts and Sciences. Retrieved October 2, 2020, from file:///Users/TRPatmore/Downloads/PDF datastream.pdf

Herrera et al's definition would suggest, is an example of the contestation prong of cultural identity.

The Higuayagua Taínos are comprised of regional *Cacike* (chiefs), *Behike* (spiritual leaders/shaman), with two designations for the leadership of each group called *Atunwa* (first high leader) and *Biama* (second high leader), and *Bohuti* (spiritual leaders/ Behike in training). There are *Tukada* (council members of the many different tribal councils), *Bahiaro/ Baheri* (advisors to Cacike or Behike), and *Adurawalo* (liaisons between tribes).

HIGUAYAGUA TAÍNO LEADERSHIP ROLES	
MIYU'TUKADA	Grand council comprised of the various roles listed below
CACIKE ATUNWA CACIKE BIAMA	Grand Chief- Founder Second Chief works closely with Atunwa
BEHIKE ATUNWA BEHIKE BIAMA	Grand spiritual leader- founding member Second Behike- works closely with Atunwa
BOHUTI	Spiritual leaders/ Behike in training
TUKADA	Council member- there are several councils
BAHIARO / BAHERI	Advisors to Cacike or Behike
ADURAWALO	Liaisons between tribes
AKUTU'ADA	Council of Grandmothers- Advisors to all- Problem solvers
TEKIN'ADA	Council of Teachers
NABORIA	All non- position holding members

There is also the *Akutu'ada* (Council of Grandmothers- who are advisors to all, and problem solvers), *Tekina'ada* (Council of Teachers), and the *Miyu'tukada* (Grand Council) comprised of all the leadership positions. The *Abinaki Warawatea*, or dance circle, is just one of the social groups that can be joined, and a Youth Council is currently being developed. "Any member can become any of the above, except Behike." Estevez says. "All they have to do is demonstrate that they can be fair in all situations, they can put the collective first, and are willing to work like demons to help promote our people."

Modern genetic testing has an interesting implication on Taíno culture, "considering our historical narratives, we

were assured all Taíno had died within 30-50 years of contact" Estevez shares. We can calculate this as 17-19 generations ago. Modern DNA tests are able to test back 5 generations of DNA, which represents 64 ancestors contributing genetic material. "If you just had just one (1) full

blooded [Taíno] ancestor,” Jorge asserts, “I assure you that it would not show on one of those tests”. DNA tests alone, however, are not the basis of contemporary Taíno identity. “We must resist these ‘numbers’ which say nothing of our intangible memory and oral tradition,” Cacike encourages, on his tribe’s Facebook page, where Taínos from across the globe gather to share knowledge, and community. “We must resist falling into the blood quantum trap. We are Taíno because we, as a community, recognize each other.” This is to say that there is no hierarchy of Taíno pedigree within modern culture. Today, DNA tests are used merely to confirm scientifically what the Taíno community has known all along. “Before they would tell us that Abuelita’s claims of Indian ancestry were denial of negritude, at best, or just plain delusional. Now they know better.”

A Cacike of a Taíno community with membership in the thousands, Estevez believes cultural membership rules “should and must be defined by the collective group”, and within Taíno culture will vary from tribe to tribe. While tribal membership is not required to claim Taíno ancestry, or practice Taíno tradition, it is one of the only ways to engage in Taíno community. “Belonging to a tribe ensures collective exploration.” In modern times, Taíno tribes are no longer restricted by geography, with the advent of the internet offering the ability for Taínos to connect across the globe. Indeed, in the last several years many Taíno cultural interest groups have sprung up. Estevez counsels that the value of these can be determined by leaderships’ approach, especially when it comes to the weight placed on the veracity of Spanish narratives of Classic Taíno society. The Higuayagua Taíno tribe prides itself on vetting Spanish narratives against historical records, counting campesino traditions, and interviews with their closest Arawak relatives for verification. “This is how we get as close as possible to ancestral truth” says Estevez.

Gender roles are one such example of ancestral truth and practice. We know Taínos were a matrilineal society, where women took part in all aspects of society, and even held leadership roles. “Plain and simple, women are the bearers of tradition, culture and language.” Cacike Estevez says. “Higuayagua recognizes that women are the key to our growth and survival, therefore women can, and do hold any position.” In the Higuayagua Taíno tribe, women hold exactly half of the leadership roles. While there is not enough chronicled evidence to determine the specific ancient Taíno views about sexual orientation, or non-binary gender expressions, Estevez believes that all related indigenous tribes, and in most native nations, it is understood that these identities are a natural part

of the universal ebb and flow. “If I found out that my ancestors were in fact intolerant homophobes, then I as a lover of tradition would have to break with that revelation. Higuayagua is looking for Pan Caribbean Taínos to join our ranks inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations.”

The Taíno culture may have only had its genetic existence confirmed within the last few years, but the reality is that it has existed with all of Herrera’s cultural markers, for much longer. Many descendants of the Caribbean may only now be awakening to the realities that historians, scholars, and scientists had it wrong for most of their lives. “Of course some might be perplexed and question how one can embrace a Native identity that you never knew you had, based only on genes” Cacike Estevez explains, but there are resources available for learning, reconnecting, and reclaiming what has been denied for centuries. With the technology available this information is becoming more accessible by the day. The question about what it means to be Taíno goes as deep as any other cultural exploration can, and is wholly dependent on the individual explorer. For some the recognition of their ancestral DNA is enough, for others who are interested in learning about, and engaging in cultural tradition, a tribe like Higuayagua might provide the answer to a deeper call for community.



Taína is a Baltimore based Higuayagua Taíno writer, on a mission to write the Taíno culture into existence the same way the colonizers have attempted to erase it: one word, one Taíno at a time. Find out more at [TainaWrites.com](http://TainaWrites.com).