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Not Everyone Who Speaks Spanish is from Spain: Taino Survival in the 21st Century Dominican Republic

Dr. P. J. Ferbel

Introduction

The national identity of the Dominican Republic is based on an idealized story of three cultural roots-- Spanish, African, and Taíno--with a selective amnesia of the tragedies and struggles inherent to the processes of colonial domination and resistance. Further, African, Taíno and mixed Afro-Mestizo culture have been marginalized in favor of nationalist ideologies of progress and civilization found in the embrace of *Hispanidad* and Catholicism. In such a way, Dominicans have been disconnected from their African, their indigenous, and their mixed Afro-Mestizo *Criollo* (Creole) ancestry and cultural heritage, even though it is these ancestries and heritages which mark Dominicans with the significant emblems of their contemporary identity.

In this paper, I assess the survival of Taíno culture by building on the work of two important studies addressing Taíno heritage in the Dominican Republic— Bernardo Vega's (1981) "La herencia indígena en la cultura dominicana de hoy" and Garcia Arévalo's (1988) "Indigenismo, arqueología, e identidad nacional." My conclusion is that there is significant cultural heritage of Taíno origin

that has persisted to this day. That heritage, together with the historical evidence for Taíno survival presented by my colleagues Lynne Guitar and Jorge Estevez, points me to the understanding that the Taíno people were never extinct but, rather, survived on the margins of colonial society to the present.

The story of Taíno extinction was created as a colonial strategy to disempower the Native people and as a way to legitimate the importation of slaves from Africa. Ironically, the Taíno culture that survives may be considered the strongest and most deeply planted "roots" of the contemporary Afro-Mestizo *Criollo* Dominican identity. Anthropology teaches us today that there is no such thing as a "pure" race or a "pure" culture— with every generation, the composition of a population changes. Therefore, even though the physical appearance of Dominicans may be mixed-- multi-biological-- they all share a common uni-cultural heritage simply by practicing traditional Dominican cultural forms. Just because Dominicans look "African" or "European" or "Mixed" does not mean they cannot legitimately celebrate their Taíno heritage. And just because Dominicans speak Spanish it does not mean their strongest cultural root comes

from Spain. Finally, just because Dominicans want to celebrate their Taíno roots does not necessarily mean they want to negate their African or European or other heritages.

Today, as professors, researchers, and students we must accept the responsibility to critically re-examine the stories of Taíno extinction from a position free from racial politics and nationalist agendas. In such a way, we open the door for all Dominicans to understand their true history, identify with all their ancestors, celebrate their traditional culture, and use this knowledge to help them find their path beyond Columbus's wake.

Taíno Cultural Heritage

My knowledge of Taíno cultural heritage comes from five years living and

working in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic, the land the Taíno called Quisqueya. I first went to the Dominican Republic in 1992 to conduct research on the commemoration of the Columbian Quincentennial. At that time, I assumed what I read in textbooks and journals about the extinction of the Taíno was true. I found many romanticized representations of Taínos used as decoration on buildings, hawking products like mascots, and generally presented in ways that suggested they were frozen in a time before Columbus (see Figure 1). There was little public discussion about history or cultural identity, and the official channels that promoted heritage and identity were focused on celebrating the Hispanic past and a myth about a tripartite identity that led principally to the creation of *merengue* music. The Taíno were extinct. Period.

Figure 1



Representing Taínos:
Hatuey Soda Crackers

I was therefore surprised to find many strong cultural forms of Taíno origin practiced in daily Dominican life, especially in the *campo* (see Figure 2). I was also struck by the ironic and contradictory expression of Taíno cultural

knowledge, whereby many Dominicans practiced strong indigenous cultural forms but did not identify with them. In fact, seen as socio-economically unprogressive, they were often ashamed by these cultural displays. At the same

time, the Taíno archaeological heritage was plundered and vandalized (see Figure 3), history and culture were topics of interest only for the upper class, and there were little resources available for communities to encourage traditional cultural activities. I soon began to realize

how the traditional culture of Quisqueya existed in opposition to the economic realities of "modernization." In other words, development towards a Western economy meant movement away from traditional Dominican culture and Taíno heritage.

Figure 2



Traditional *casabe* making on a *buren* griddle at Guagui, La Vega

Figure 3



Vandalism of petroglyphs, Rio Chacuey, Dajabon. Photo credit: Jason McIntire

"Heritage" may be defined as the cultural and biological legacy that contemporary people have carried on from their ancestral past to become a part of their communal identity in the present. Taíno heritage can be found in the Dominican Republic in many forms, including language, agriculture, food ways, medicinal knowledge, craft technologies, architecture, spiritual beliefs, family life, festivals, popular culture, and genetic bloodlines (Ferbel

1995; Garcia Arévalo 1988, 1990; Vega 1980; Weeks and Ferbel 1994). This Taíno heritage has been passed on for generations, originating with the Arawakan speaking people who migrated into the Caribbean from the Orinoco River Valley some 1500 years before Spanish exploration. Archaeologists believe a distinct Taíno culture had developed in the Caribbean by the year 600 A.D. and thus flourished for 900 years before Columbus (Rouse 1992; Weeks and

Ferbel 1994). Given this time frame, it should come as no surprise that the Taíno rooted their culture with a profound understanding of the Caribbean landscape.

The impact of 15th century European colonization on the Taíno was nothing short of devastating, and completely re-structured the trajectory of their native life ways. 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 Taíno had to find radical ways to survive. Resistance took many forms. Many Taíno fought against the intruders, who had the distinct advantage of coming from a place with a history of guns, swords, horses, dogs, and trickery. Many Taíno hid in isolated Maroon 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.

Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons (1992) shows that during the period of early Spanish colonization a process of transculturation began whereby Taínos mixed within the Spanish population, together with African slaves, giving rise to a new Creole culture. This is substantiated historically by census records of 1514, which show forty per cent of Spanish men on the island had Indian wives or concubines (Moya Pons 1992:135). Interaction between Africans and Indians is documented in plantation records and in descriptions of runaway slave communities (Garcia Arévalo 1990:275). Further, ethnohistorian Lynne Guitar (1998) demonstrates the historical marginalization of the Taíno beginning in the 16th century. While being declared

extinct in official documents—for the purpose of legitimating colonial control and rationalizing 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 Indians, Africans and Europeans, who 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. Naturally, they relied on their Taíno heritage, which represented many generations of knowledge, tradition, and oral history about the land. This is still true for present-day Dominicans, especially in the agrarian countryside.

Taíno Heritage

Linguistic Features

The Dominican Republic often uses its indigenous name Quisqueya as a common referent. Dominicans like to call themselves "*Quisqueyanos*"; the name even appears in the first words of the Dominican national anthem: "*Quisqueyanos valientes...*"

The Spanish language has several hundred words that come from the indigenous Arawakan language of the Caribbean. These words go beyond names of objects, place names, flora, and fauna that did not have a name in the Spanish language, like *canoa*, *hurican*, *hamaca*, *caiman*, *barbacoa*, *tobaco*, *maraca*, *marimba*, *iguana*, and *manatee*. There are also many words and

expressions that are indigenous in origin that are used instead of their Spanish names. Examples include: *mabi*, a natural juice; *macana*, a policeman's club; and *macuto*, a hand sack. The Taíno phrase "un chin" or "chin-chin" means a small amount in Dominican Spanish, and is as common as the Spanish phrase "un poquito." The use of these words suggest not simply the effect of one culture borrowing or appropriating names for things they did not know, but a more complex interplay between two cultures.

Many, if not a majority of Dominican cities, *campos*, rivers, and mountains have indigenous names, including: Amina, Bani, Bao, Bonao, Cotui, Cutupu, Dajabon, Damajagua, Guajaca, Guayubin, Inoa, Jacagua, Janico, Licey, Magua, Maguana, Mao, Nagua, and Samana. The majority of rivers have Taíno names, including Haina, Maimon, Ozama, Sosua, Tireo, and Yaque. Most native trees and fruits have Taíno names, including Anacajuita, Caimito, Cajuil, Caña, Caoba, Ceiba, Cuaba, Guacima, Guano, Guao, Guayaba, Guanabana and Guayacan. Beyond flora, indigenous insects, birds, fish, and other animals with names of Taíno origin may list into the hundreds. They include the *Bibijagua* (ant), *Comejen* (termite), *Carey* (sea turtle), *Hicotea* (river turtle), *manatee*, and *Guaraguao* (Dominican hawk).

Due to the process of *mestizaje*, whereby the Spaniard male colonists took Indian wives, it is not surprising that no

Taíno surnames have survived to the present. Still, Dominicans use historical Taíno names in the contemporary naming of children. Examples include the prominent politicians Caonabo Polanco and Hatuey Deschamps, and jazz great Guarionex Aquino.

Many Dominicans can distinguish a Taíno name by its sound, though not reliably. It may be that the Cibao rural dialect's transformation of words ending in the Spanish suffix "-ado" into the Arawakan sounding "ao" is a vestige of Taíno pronunciation (e.g., *colorado* becomes *colorao*). Regardless of its true historicity, it is certain that there exists a romanticized Indian association with these campo pronunciations. Another example is the use of the "l" with words ending with an "R" (Qué calor! becomes Qué calo-il).

It is interesting that several Taíno words that are used in other parts of the Antilles, are not used in the Dominican Republic. Examples include using the Spanish word *lechosa* instead of the indigenous *papaya*, the Spanish word *pina* (pineapple) instead of the indigenous *yayama*, and the Spanish *cotorra* (parrot) instead of the indigenous *higuaca*. However, for all these words, many people are aware of their indigenous names as well. There are several instances where both indigenous and Spanish words are interchangeable, for example, the Spanish word *tarantula* and the Taíno word *cacata* are used equally (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



Tarantula, also known by the Taíno word *cacata*

Some indigenous words have changed their meanings over the years. For example, a *batey*, which originally described a Taíno ceremonial ball court, today refers to the residence location of Haitians on sugar plantations. *Guacara*, originally referring to a cave or cavern, now describes a place or thing of antiquity.

Agriculture

Many Dominican agricultural terms have Taíno origins. The word *conuco*, while its meaning is lost as a mixed-crop method of agriculture similar to the mainland indigenous *milpa*, has retained the concept as a plot of land used for farming. Unfortunately, Dominicans have not retained the Taíno use of *montones*, or raised mound agriculture, and suffer from one of the worst records of topsoil depletion in the Caribbean (Ferguson 1992). So too, unfortunately, Dominicans have overused the Taíno technique of slash and burn (swidden) agriculture.

Many Dominican farmers use what they call the *mysterios*, or the spiritual secrets of agriculture, including planting with the lunar cycle. This practice is documented for the Taíno as well. Agricultural knowledge is reported to be passed on from generation to generation. It is interesting to note that in some regions, particular days of the week are considered bad times to plant. This

practice may be a creolized Catholic/Taíno manner of understanding the spiritual division of the human world. One final agricultural item from pre-Columbian times is the use of the *coa*, the indigenous word for a digging stick, which is still employed for planting, though today with a metal point.

Yucca and Casabe

The starchy vegetable tuber *yucca* is a central part of contemporary Dominican diet. Sweet *yucca* is a staple, boiled and served for breakfast and dinner, often with eggs or a small meat accompaniment. *Yucca* is well matched to Dominican soil and life ways, whereby it can grow in semi-arid climates and on hillsides, and can conserve for several months in the earth without rotting. It was the key to Taíno survival and it is no surprise that *Yucahu* was one of the principal deities. So too is it identified as the most Dominican of the staples.

The baking of *casabe* bread from bitter *yucca* flour is a Dominican tradition that has strong ties to the Taíno past. While common at the household level only generations ago, *casabe* production is today available principally from family bakeries and small factories, who truck the *casabe* to local stores throughout the country. The technology of *casabe* production has not changed much over

the years, and most of the terminology is the same. The yucca is grated with *guayos* (today sharpened spoons peel the yucca and mechanical metal graters are used for grating), leached of the poisonous starch (*anaíboa* or *almidón*) in canoe shaped receptacles (*canoas*), strained, and dried into flour (*catibia*). Then the flour is spread with the help of a circular iron mold, and baked on the top of an oven (*buren*) for about twenty minutes until solid (Figure 5). *Casabe* can

conserve in its cooked form for several months without spoilage, making it an important food product in the tropical environment. *Casabe* is always served during Christmas and Easter times, and its presence on the Dominican table is expected. It is important to note that in recent years the availability of bread made from wheat flour have led to a diminished use of *casabe* in Dominican diets.

Figure 5



Making *casabe* at a bakery at Cacique, Moncion

Alternative uses of yucca flour have declined in their importance over the years, however several food products are still made. *Panesico* are baked logs of yucca flour and pork fat, and are considered a specialty of the Cibao region. Dominican empanadas, deep-fried dough pockets stuffed with meat, are only made with yucca flour. *Bolas de yuca* are deep-fried balls of yucca flour. *Joadra* are powdery ginger cookies made of yucca starch.

Foodways and Tobacco Use

Besides yucca, many fruits and vegetables of indigenous origin have remained staples in the Dominican diet.

They include the *guayaba*, *guanabana*, *pina*, *lechosa*, *yautia*, *mani*, and *batata*. Other indigenous fruits and vegetables that are eaten but are becoming less common include the *anon*, *mamon*, *caimito*, *jagua*, *jobo*, and *mamey*. *Ajies* (peppers) are an essential part of daily bean preparation. The popular Dominican *salcocho* (stew) may be derived from the indigenous pepper pot or *ajiejaco*, and *arepas* (corn-fritters) may also be of indigenous origin. Certainly both these dishes have native connotations surrounding them. So too is seasoning with *bixa* (annatto seed), although this spice's use has dwindled with the availability of packaged seasoning and canned tomato sauce.

Cooking in earthenware pots, similar in style to Taíno ceramic ware, while becoming more and more rare, is known as a way of making beans more flavourful. Vega (1987:100-101) documents the use of another indigenous root, *guayiga* in the making of a bread-mush called *cholo*, popular in the south. Another root, *guayaro*, appears wild throughout the Cibao. The terms *mabi* and *cacheo* describe non-alcoholic drinks with indigenous origins that are still locally produced from fermented palm. Finally, the Taíno word *bucán* describes the technique of spit-roasting, an important element of a barbecue (Taíno word *barbacoa*).

Tobacco (*tabaco*) has a long history of use in the Dominican Republic, especially in the campo. Tobacco is an integral part of *santería* ceremonies, where cigar smoking is used in spirit offerings and possession rituals. Besides being big business for export, tobacco is ubiquitous as a smoking product throughout the Dominican Republic. People smoke locally made cigarettes, as well as cigars and pipes. Many traditions of tobacco use include rolling cigars (*tubanos*), or smoking a compacted tobacco leaf plug called *andullo* in a pipe (*cachimba*) or rolled in cigarette paper (*pachuche*).

Medicinal Knowledge

Dominican natural medicinal knowledge makes use of many indigenous plant species and healing techniques. Many remedies have a Taíno association to them, and it is probable that this association is not coincidental but was handed down over the generations as seen in Cuba (Barreiro 1989). Examples of natural medicine

using indigenous products are numerous and include the use of *calabaza* leaves for toothaches and swelling, ingesting maguey juice for the flu, and eating *guayaba* for nausea. There are herbalists and *curanderos* in every campo, and it is often common to see greater reliance on natural medicines further away from industrialized city centers (Weeks et al. 1994). However, due to the increased use of pharmaceuticals, natural medicine has also declined in recent years.

Fishing Techniques

Fishing techniques of indigenous origin have been well documented by Vega (1987:105-106). These include the use of fishing corrals, the temporary poisoning of small rivers or pools (sometimes with the *almidón* leached from bitter yucca), the use of fiber fishing nets (*nasas*), and techniques for localizing fish and shellfish in shallow waters. The following fish and marine animals all have Taíno names: *carite*, *menjua*, *cojinua*, *jurel*, *dajao*, *guabina*, *macabi*, *tiburón*, *guatapana*, *lambi*, *burgao*, *carey*, *juey*, *hicotea*, and *jaiva*. Fishing has become a less important food procurement strategy in recent years, as dams, soil erosion, and pollution have dramatically lessened the quantity of fish in rivers.

Crafts and Technologies

Locally made ceramics use basic forms with transculturative origins. Most popular in contemporary *campo* use today are *tinajas*, large amphoras used for water storage, and rounded cooking vessels called *oyas*. With the availability of imported plastic and metal containers

and cooking pots, however, the use of ceramics in Dominican culture is waning.

While the Taíno had a strong tradition of woodworking, Dominicans seem to have been progressively losing their woodworking skills. This may be, in part, due to deforestation and the unavailability of many of the fine woods like *caoba* (mahogany). There is, however, in the contemporary Dominican Republic, industrial production of fine furniture. Rocking chairs are well known as Dominican cultural items and chairs are available for guests in even the poorest of households.

Bateas are flat wooden containers that are used to carry fruits. Their origin is Taíno, and often associated with their use for washing gold in rivers. Indeed, *bateas* are still used for this purpose today, for example in the Rio Chacuey. *Bateas*, like ceramics, are becoming less and less used, with the importation of cheap alternative plastic containers and

receptacles. Many traditional makers of *bateas* have had to use less durable trees in recent years, making their products of cheaper quality. Some have expanded their product line into the tourist market by making decorative wooden spoons and forks. It is interesting to see that the word *batea* has been extended to the *ponchera*, the Spanish word for a large plastic bowl.

Dominican boat craft are still made along the coast, but have lost much of the technological features used in making Taíno *canoas* and *cayucos*. The method of making a *canoas* from a hollowed-out royal palm as a feeding and watering trough for cows is still found in some *campos* (Figure 6). This technology is becoming increasingly rare due to the limitations put on the cutting of larger trees, on the number of craftsmen who still know how to make a *canoas*, and on the increasing availability of used tractor tires as watering troughs.

Figure 6



Canoa feed and water troughs in Los Pinos, Moncion

Calabashes, called *higuero*, made of various sizes and shapes, are still used by rural Dominicans as water receptacles, bowls, and food containers (Figure 7). *Macutos*, handbags of *guano* or *cana*

fiber are also still made, but are less prevalent due to the availability of plastic and paper bags. Baskets (*canasta*) made of *bejuco* (vines), palm, *caña*, *guano*, and other native fibers are used for clothes

hampers and food containers, but are of relatively poor quality. *Cabuya* fibers are still used as cordage for ropes and whips, but synthetic fibers have become more popular in recent years. The use of native cotton (*algodón*) has all but disappeared with the importation of woven fabrics. *Hamaca* (hammocks) are today made with nylon cord mostly for sale to tourists.

Beds have wholly replaced the hammock for sleeping. Finally, the use of large *lambi* (*Strombus gigas*) shells, called *fotutos*, by butchers to advise people what meat is being slaughtered by the number of blasts on the trumpet has indigenous origins, but is also disappearing as a cultural form.

Figure 7



Higuera at the *Fiesta Campesinal*, Moca

Architecture

The word *bohío* describes a country house, often with a *caña* roof and *yagua* palm siding, and is identified for its Taíno origins. It also describes the prevalent *ranchos*, patio or field structures with *cana* roofs used to shade the sun. *Bohíos* are built like the circular indigenous *caney*, or in a rectangular manner. *Caña* is used for its availability, its ability to withstand water, its durability (lasting up to twenty years in a tropical

climate), and its breathability. *Caña* is also appreciated for its decorative beauty, and is often chosen for discotheques, restaurants, and cock fighting rings (*galleras*). The only negative element of using *caña* is it is not good for rainwater collection. *Bejuocos* (vines) are sometimes still used to bind together *ranchos*, although nails are much more common. Another style of house building that also reflects Taíno heritage are those that use the royal palm *yagua* fronds for walls and roofing (see Figure 8).

Figure 8



Yagua house in Jamao, Moca

Folklore and Religion

Folklore and religion have many associations with indigenous heritage. Taíno Indian spirits are commonly reported to dwell in rivers and caves throughout the country. Many sites of natural beauty or geological rarity have become associated as Indian places or sacred sites. Pools in rivers are often named "*charco de los Indios*" as are caves "*cueva de los Indios*", even if there is little artifactual evidence of indigenous use or occupation. Folklore often surrounds these places as spiritually dangerous or as sites where healing may occur, and are used accordingly.

Folk syncretic belief systems combine Indian imagery and spirit blessings into their ritual and belief structures. Herbal shops, or *botanicas*, often sell Indian statues and candles which are thought to bring good luck and fortune to a person using them. Indigenous herbs and flowers like *copey* are burned in spiritual contexts. Small bracelets are worn by new-borns for protection. Indigenous axe-heads or "*pedras de rayo*" are sometimes put into *tinajas* to protect a house from lightning.

Many stories about supernatural beings have indigenous origins, including the *Ciguapa*, a woman-beast with long hair and inverted feet.

Art, Poetry, and Literature

In the field of the arts, poetry, and literature, Dominicans have made great use of indigenous themes. Work by Cibao artists such as Luis Munoz, Bottin Castellanos, and Gina Rodriguez use Taíno imagery and technology in their artistic expression. Indigenous themes also appear in works of poetry and literature, theater and modern dance. Merenguero Juan Luis Guerra uses many indigenous themes in his music; a recent album of his was titled *areíto*. Many Dominican folksongs, as well, make reference to Indians of Quisqueya, including the caciques Enriquillo and Anacaona.

Popular Identity

Perhaps the greatest association with the indigenous past comes with the biological feature known as the "Indio" skin color. While some official identity cards use the term "*trigueño*" to describe the majority of Dominicans, "*Indio*" is the commonly held concept for the color of Dominican skin, and the "race" of the Dominican people. The term, popularized by Trujillo to distance Dominicans from

darker skinned Haitians, skirts the issue of Native American inheritance, which is referred to by the word *indígena*, and simply defines the physical manifestation of being of mixed race.

Dobal (1989:25) writes about indigenous physical qualities, temperaments, and sexuality of Taíno origin, and suggests that the long, straight-hair, large brown eyes, and soft skin of campesinas is Taíno in origin. While such observational criteria appear straight forward, subjective traits have proven to be unreliable in making larger cultural generalizations. So too, is it problematic to use early Spanish descriptions of physical beauty to generalize what the Taíno looked like in the 15th century. However, it is acknowledged that biological "racial" features are recognized by members of a cultural community and often form the basis of assessing cultural difference. Dominicans, certainly, would agree with Dobal's description of *Indios*.

Dobal further suggests that the Dominican has inherited the indigenous love for liberty, the appreciation for the esthetics as opposed to the functionality of objects, the lack of ambition or greediness, and the love for their homeland and place of birth (Dobal 1989:26). Indian strength and bravery is often a quality assumed by many Dominicans, and many campos which are known for the courage of their people are cited as places where there is a lot of Indian blood. Matrilocality is a cultural trait described in ethnohistoric documents about the Taíno, and can be tied to some degree to the present. Perhaps, it is a matrilocality love for homeland, that Dobal comments on, a love to be in the place where you were born and raised.

In the Dominican Republic, it is difficult to attach a clean ethnic category

to the whole population. The amount of historical and contemporary miscegenation between individuals of different African, Indian, and European blood has been very high, and has produced a multitude of biological mixes. There is a tremendous range of so-called "racial" features, for example, in hair texture, skin color, and facial shape. Basically, the way Dominicans recognize and talk about biology, some Dominicans look more "Black", some more "White", and some more "Indian". In this sense, Dominicans appear as a multi-biological people. On top of this, however, many Dominicans have combinations of "racial" features that make it difficult to pinpoint their exact biological ancestry. Dominicans have invented names for over 20 different physical mixes including *trigueño*, *indio*, *indio claro*, *trigueño oscuro*, *canelo*, *pinto*, etcetera. Thus, the Dominican Republic appears a "melting-pot" as well as a place of many separate biologies.

Ultimately, though, when simple biology—the way people look—is put aside in favor of discussions about culture—what people do—the Dominican Republic displays a common denominator, uni-cultural identity that has little correlation with the physical appearance of its people. Indeed, there is no such thing as a distinct Black Dominican culture, White Dominican culture, or Indian Dominican culture. Regional differences do exist but for the most part, cultural differences appear between rich Dominicans and poor Dominicans, and between "city" Dominicans and "campo" Dominicans, and even these differences dissolve in discussions of a unifying national identity.

While it is true that Dominicans with more European ancestry and culture represent the group which historically

have had more access to money and power, they represent a small fraction of the demographic whole. While their influence in controlling the production of national identity has been strong, I will be focusing on the cultural realities for the majority of Dominicans, who are poor and without access to power.

Popular Culture

Finally, Taíno imagery is often found in a romanticized form in various elements of Dominican capitalist and nationalist culture. Strong Taíno caciques, who appear portrayed as national heroes, appear on stamps and coins. Indians are found as sculpture and bas-relief on buildings, often in positions of subservience or in chains. Indians are often denigrated to the level of mascots hawking the following products: Enriquillo soda water, Guarina saltines and cookies, Siboney rum, and Hatuey soda crackers. The name "Taíno" adorns businesses from pizza parlors to delivery services. A popular beer is called Quisqueya. For many Dominicans these product names are their most familiar association with the Taíno past.

While nationalist Hispanic imagery has had a constraining effect on how Dominicans view the Taíno past, there are also unofficial alternate expressions that resist the dominant discourses. For example, many Dominicans claim that it is bad luck (*fuku*) to say the name Christopher Columbus aloud and that La Isabella, one of the first Spanish settlements on the north coast of the island, is haunted by Spanish ghosts. These may be considered signs of struggle against dominant history and rejections of official ways of speaking about the legitimated glory of the Spanish past. During the Columbian quincentennial a large multi-million dollar lighthouse monument was built in the Dominican capital of Santo Domingo. Surrounding it is a tall stone wall that blocks poor *barrio* residents from crossing the Faro's grounds. This wall, built to hide the realities of Dominican poverty from the visiting dignitary or tourist, is known by everyone as the *Muro de la Verguenza*, or the Wall of Shame. It is an apt metaphor for the official national vision of Dominican identity represented by the Faro: available only to those who have the power and wealth to access it (see Figure 9).

Figure 9



The Columbus Lighthouse from the other side of the Wall of Shame, Santo Domingo

With the murder of human rights lawyer Rafael Ortiz during a quincentennial protest march, attention was called to the repressive, manipulative way the government was controlling the celebration of its national history. Ortiz's assassination proved to be a successful governmental tactic to quell further resistance to official quincentennial activities. Posters and simple graffiti reading "*No al Quinto Centenario!*" became the only visible form of organized resistance. Several critical articles in national newspapers did appear but had very little influence on the national quincentennial programs.

The quincentennial inspired Pilgrimage for Human Dignity was held on 5 December 1992 as a protest against the official Colombian celebrations.

Literature distributed at the march read "*... vamos a conmemorar la resistencia indígena, negra y popular en el día de la llegada de Colón...*" On this pilgrimage from Santiago to Santo Cerro (La Vega), various banners were unfurled with anti-governmental imagery. One banner satirized the typical San Miguel image, dramatizing an Indian as San Miguel, slaying Columbus as the devil, his wings the flags of Spain and the United States (see Figure 10). It is no coincidence that San Miguel is also the "Captain of the 21st Indigenous Division" in syncretic religious belief. That is, Saint Michael has been transformed in folk belief systems to represent the Indian spirit who struggles against oppression (of all negative forms represented by the devil).

Figure 10



San Miguel protest banner

The active work of individuals like the organizers of the Colombian quincentennial protests opened many eyes to the realities of the Dominican past and present, which were exposed as intricately connected. So too did many educators, teachers and parents engage in their students and children a critical response to the national celebrations. A librarian from a private Santiago school encouraged students to work on projects concerning the indigenous past. The work

they produced was well researched, informative, and edifying.

Conclusion

In a sense, the stories of Spanish colonization were successful: the Taíno were declared extinct and nationalist Hispanic ideology has dominated the country's discussions of cultural identity. However, a closer examination of the persistence of Taíno-derived cultural

forms reveals their underlying strength. The roots of traditional Dominican culture are truly Taíno.

It is no accident that from the excluded nature of Taíno heritage some of the most creative cultural, artistic, and political expression is born. Most Dominicans who reflect on the "extinct" Taíno past they were taught in school and popular culture, realize it is only a partial story of their identity. Dominican educator Antonio de Moya (1993) writes that "the [Indian] genocide is the big lie of our history... the Dominican Taínos continue to live, 500 years after European contact" (1993:10).

The direction that Taíno identity will take in the Dominican Republic seems to depend on both the survival of indigenous cultural elements in the face

of advancing Western culture of development and globalization, and on the work of motivated individuals to critically examine the composition of their identity. From my personal understanding, identifying with traditional heritage arises from the active vision of elders, the true teaching of parents to their children, the selfless commitment of individuals to their community, and the heartfelt love and respect for the spirit of the land people live on and call their home. This may not be the easiest task for colonized Dominicans living in an underdeveloped nation under a global order. As we say in the Cibao, "*No es fácil, compai!*" But for Quisqueyanos "*valientes*" with great spirits and centuries of resistance, it seems as natural to say "*No hay ma' na'! Hay que echar p'alante!*"

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