



The Origin and Survival of the Taíno Language

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"The Arawak is described as 'the softest of all Indian tongues.' It is rich in vowels and free from gutturals. The enunciation is distinct and melodious" (Brinton 1871).

In this essay, I will elaborate on the native languages of the Caribbean and their usage at the present time. I will be using a spelling system for native Caribbean words that I believe better approximates the original pronunciation.

The Greater Antilles, lying in the center of the Caribbean region, contain the four largest islands of the area. The islands of Kuba (Cuba), Kiskeya/Haití (Haití/Dominican Republic), Borikén (Puerto Rico), Xamaíka (Jamaica), as well as most of the surrounding islands, all shared a universal language with regional dialects. In 1690, traveler Charles de Rochefort said, "It is to be observed that though the Caribbeans of all the islands do generally understand one another, yet there is in several of them some dialect difference from that of the others. In the mid 1500's, Las Casas, a Dominican priest, who had learned to speak Taíno wrote, "In all these islands there is but one tongue and the same customs."

The Taíno language of the Greater Antilles is related to the Arawak language stemming from South America. "The people of the Arawak language family still comprise one of the more widespread indigenous cultures within the relatively large kinship nations in the Amazon and Orinoco river basins of South America" (Barreiro, 1990). The language of the central Arawak or Lokono (meaning the 'people') and the Garífuna language, currently of Central America, are prime examples that are closely related to the Taíno language, which is sometimes referred to as 'Island-Arawak.'

The Kalínago (Island-Carib) of neighboring islands such as Wáitukubulí (Dominica) also fused their Carib language with that of the Eyéri (Arawak speakers) and Taíno peoples. The Kalínago, Eyéri and Taíno routinely traded, fought and inter-married, thus enabling the women to pass down the language to their children. An "Island-Carib" dictionary, translated into French was compiled by Father Raymond Breton, a Dominican priest on the Island of Wáitukubulí in 1665. Today we know that the dictionary is a fusion between the Island-Carib and Arawak languages. "It is quite clear that the language described by Breton (in the Lesser Antilles) was Arawak, not Carib (though containing many Carib elements)" (Taylor, 1977).

In 1797, the so called "Black-Caribs" (due to racial mixing) or Garífuna of Yulúmein (St. Vincent) were exiled by the British and resettled in the Bay Islands (present-day Islas de la Bahía) off the northern coast of Honduras. The Kalínago of Wáitukubulí were never removed and remain there till this day. The Garífuna, speak a Creole language, which still retains components of their indigenous origin. It is

composed of approximately 45% Arawak, 25% Kaliña (Carib), 15% French, 10% English and 5% Spanish. It is interesting to note that the grammar and lexicon of the Garífuna and Lokono languages are primarily of Arawakan-Maipure origin, making them a valuable component in the reconstruction of the Taíno language. There are an estimated 70,000 Garífuna speakers and 1,500 Lokono speakers today. Their dialects are the closest to the Taíno language.

Contrary to what has been thought and taught by some, the Taíno language was not completely extinguished. Portions were absorbed over time into the Spanish speaking Caribbean. There are well over 800 Taíno and Island-Carib words still spoken throughout the Caribbean region. Among words of indigenous origin are objects, geographical names, and personal names, as well as flora and fauna. Contemporary cities and towns with Taíno names, to list just a few, include: Yabukoa, Bayamón, Arecibo, Guantánamo, Habana, Aibonito (derived from Hatiboniko), Tanamá, Moka, Morovis, Cayey, Naguabo, Mayarí, and Higüey. Throughout all the Islands, the majority of fruits, native trees and rivers also retain their Taíno names. Trees and fruits with Taíno names, include: Ceiba, wáçima (guáçima), wayakán (guayakán), tabonuko, mamey, kaimito, wanábana (guanábana), yagrumo, henekén, mahágua and hiwéra (higüera). Rivers with Taíno names include Hokonuko, Hakaboa, Cibuko, Bauta, Baramaya, Oçama and Bairoa. Other commonly used Taíno words, to list just a few: tonína (Caribbean dolphin), pahuíl (cashew nut), tabuko (thicket, underbrush), makakóta (this word, which refers to the head of a fish, was provided by local fisherman in the late 1950's), arkabuko (forest, woodland), chichí (a baby), butaka (a Carib word for 'rocking chair'), karakól (sea shell), mabí (a refreshment made from a root), makuto (a backpack), kokolia (sea crab), kolibrí (hummingbird), warawáo (guaraguao) (Caribbean red-tailed hawk), wayo (guayo) (a grater), and chischí (a light rain). These words and many more are so common that they are assumed to be of Spanish origin. There are many that use both the Spanish and Taíno word interchangeably: examples include the Spanish word 'buho' and the Taíno word 'múkaro' for owl; the Spanish word 'sardinas' and the Carib word 'tinápa' for sardines, and the Spanish adjective 'poquito' and the Taíno adjective 'chinchín' meaning 'a little bit'. "The prevalence of these words suggests a prolonged period of Taíno-Spanish interaction whereby these names could be wholly incorporated into the Spanish language" (Ferbel, 1995).

Some words of Taíno origin are used as adjectives and verbs. For example, the phrase 'dar mucho katéy' means to be very bothersome. 'Aciguatao' means to be sad. 'Hohoto, -ta' means rotten or insipid, particularly in reference to tubers (potatoe/yam). Other examples include: 'duro como el guayakán' which refers to a person who is in good health; 'los años de la guákara' which refers to a time long ago; 'tiene unos makos bonitos' which means having pretty eyes (aku being the word for 'eye'). There are Taíno words that combine with Spanish suffixes, creating new words. The word 'baguada' refers to a storm that comes in from the sea. It is composed of bawa, 'sea', and the Spanish suffix -ada.

The distinct nasal sound heard in the contemporary speech of the Spanish Caribbean may have been influenced by Taíno phonology. The pronunciation of the aspirated 'H' is a common trait in many indigenous languages including Taíno. Also, it is quite likely that the transformation of words ending with the suffix -ado into -ao, which originated in parts of Spain, was adopted by the indigenous population due to its similarity to existing Taíno language structure: e.g. colorado becomes colorao, apurado becomes apurao, and cansado becomes cansao.

Taíno villages continued to exist into the 19th century and Taíno consciousness also continues to the present day. A census taken in Kiskeya (Dominican Republic) in 1777 revealed that out of the total population of 400,000, 100,000 were of Taíno-European descent and 60,000 of Taíno-African descent (Emilio Rodrigues de Demorizi). An un-official census in 1780 in the town of San German, Puerto Rico revealed a large indigenous population, which was proven by an official census in 1799 that recorded about 2,000 natives in the region. In light of recent Mitochondrial DNA studies conducted by Dr. Juan Martinez Cruzado, a geneticist at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, it has been found that at least 61% of Puerto Ricans possess Native American DNA. Similar results will probably be observed at other Caribbean islands. These new findings obviously challenge the biased view that indigenous peoples disappeared from the Caribbean. "Throughout the Caribbean,

usually in remote mountain ranges and coastal promontories, remnant groups and communities of Taíno-Arawak and Carib descendents survive to the present” (Barreiro, 1990). In Kuba, there is a strong Guahiro-Taíno presence in the eastern most provinces of Barakoa and Kamagüey. There is a Carib reserve on the island of Wáitukubulí, where the Kalínago continue to make canoes (kanoa) in the traditional fashion. People of Carib and Taíno-Arawak descent can be found living throughout towns and villages such as Arima on the island of Kairi (Trinidad).

Thus, the native language continued to thrive in small enclaves throughout the Caribbean islands. We can speculate that the last fluent speakers of Taíno on the island of Kuba passed away in the mid to late nineteenth century. In the Lesser Antilles the last fluent speakers of Island-Carib passed away in the mid 1920's. In the 1940's and 50's, Douglas Taylor, a linguist living on the island of Wáitukubulí, was still able to find islanders who could recall portions of the language they heard as children from their grandparents. And let us not forget the Garífuna who continue to speak the indigenous language of the Caribbean.

Present studies have been made on the Taíno language such as The Taíno Picture Dictionary (Palabras Taínas/ Adián Taíno) by Daniel Wakonax Rivera in 1996, Arqueología Lingüística (Estudios modernos dirigidos al rescate y reconstrucción del arahuaco Taíno) by Dr. Manuel Álvarez Nazario in 1996, and Glosario Etimológico Taíno-Español by Perea in 1941. There are countless other articles, vocabulary lists, and Dictionaries on the Taíno and Island-Carib languages. Currently, work is being done in the Caribbean and diaspora to revive these languages--for example, Jose Boriwex Laboy who is currently teaching a class on the Taino language in New York City and has begun to use the language with others.

The purpose of this brief summary is to educate and encourage awareness in the general public, as well as in Taíno and Kalínago descendants, to continue to honor this ancient living heritage. Language is an expression of one's culture. As one Guahiro-Taíno scholar, Jose Barreiro, once said, “Inside every mestizo there is either one dead Indian, or an Indian waiting to re-emerge.”

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