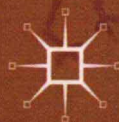


# The Myth of Indigenous Caribbean Extinction

Continuity and Reclamation in Borikén (Puerto Rico)



Tony Castanha



THE MYTH OF INDIGENOUS  
CARIBBEAN EXTINCTION  
CONTINUITY AND RECLAMATION IN  
BORIKÉN (PUERTO RICO)

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THE MYTH OF INDIGENOUS  
CARIBBEAN EXTINCTION

For my parents, and  
the late Ronald Arroyo

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## PREFACE



### STILL THERE, ALWAYS HAVE BEEN

They are still there. The indigenous peoples of Borikén (or Puerto Rico) are still there and have been since time immemorial. Such a statement will elicit surprise and wonder from many and skepticism and scorn from others. But it is true, and it is what will be shown in the pages that follow. I sat down a couple of years ago with a 94 year-old elder who told me both her mother and father were “*indio*” and that she had struggled her whole life. She used to be a *cuandera* (medicinal healer) and was from a northern coastal town. This woman had lived a fairly traditional lifestyle with modern amenities. I met another native elder, 106 years old by his account. He said his mother used to tell him about the atrocities the Spaniards had committed in the nineteenth century and that a lot of Indian people had been fighting them at that time. Not formally religious, he considered himself a very spiritual man who believed in reincarnation. Now these sorts of testimonials are not supposed to occur if we are talking about a people who have been “extinct” for over four and a half centuries. But I have found these types of stories to be abundant on the island. It is as if only the people themselves would refrain from amazement regarding our statement, as if only they knew of their true history. And there are many of them. They populate the many *barrios* of particularly the rural and mountain regions of Puerto Rico, and coastal areas too. Whole communities of Jíbaro Indian people have survived the Spanish and American colonization process and continue to practice their cultural traditions today.

Indeed, I was a little surprised myself to uncover the rich body of oral history and tradition from my latest trip to Borikén. I was already aware of and had revealed in my doctoral work a few years earlier the resistance and continued survival of the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Much of this study focused on the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Indo-European contact era leading to the late-eighteenth-century native

presence. The sixteenth-century extinction theory had been unraveled. A contemporary presence was also ethnologically provided, but more so in the form of a movement or revitalization process. However, my travels and findings in 2008 would uncover a very recent history. The oral tradition and memory exposed a vivid nineteenth- and twentieth-century story. This filled in the blanks of the past two hundred years. The sixteenth-century colonial period was suddenly transported forward three centuries as this immortalized era became a nineteenth-century one, since the Spanish had not colonized many areas of the island until this time. For many Jíbaro, the intruders were previously nowhere to be found on account of their will, innovation, and love of freedom. So when I was told numerous times how the Spaniards would “throw the babies up” and let them “fall on their swords,” this was a gruesome tale of indeed a recent history told by the children and grandchildren of those who had lived during the time of “*el componte*.” This documented period of torture during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the colonizer went “door to door” raping and pillaging, came alive through the indigenous voice. Here, representation is important in accounting for one’s knowledge and experiences.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous peoples<sup>3</sup> share the common bond of having experienced and endured Western imperialism, so it is vital to develop voices within communities needing representation in order to address past and present grievances and issues. As the oldest colony in the hemisphere, Puerto Rico fits this description and model quite well. Therefore, this is a very serious matter. It is not a depiction of a “romanticized” past but of a people struggling right now under Puerto Rican *criollo* and American “*gringo*” domination and control.

My own personal journey of struggle had led me to this point in time, and the telling of an alternative story of our people is the impetus for this writing. My family on my mother’s side, who emigrated from Borikén to work on the sugar plantations of Hawai‘i at the turn of the twentieth century, were Jíbaro or Boricua people. In 1996, as my brother and I were strolling through a store in the sleepy rural town of Yauco where our family is from, we came upon a children’s pamphlet of colored drawings portraying the Indian people of the island. We were quite surprised and excited to see such noble depictions of the indigenous peoples, since the objective of our trip was to find out more about our family roots and native ancestry. The pamphlet provided in pictures and simple captions brief lessons in village life and some cultural customs of the inhabitants such as the types of houses they lived in, the musical instruments they played, and their means of subsistent farming and fishing. It all looked very appealing—that is,



until the arrival of the Spaniards. The people were enslaved and forced to work and pan for gold. They then reorganized and rebelled against the colonizer. This seemed accurate enough until the very last drawing. Here a conquistador triumphantly stands over a dead Indian. The caption read, "Exterminio De Nuestros Indios." Behind the Spaniard stands a somber and attractive native woman, still very much alive, presumably to be assimilated into the Spanish patriarchic realm.

Most Puerto Rican third graders browsing through this book would get the vivid impression that the indigenous peoples of the island were long gone, exterminated right after the Spanish coming. That final drawing would create an indelible mark not easily erased. And this is just about the way the history of indigenous Caribbean peoples has been meant to be portrayed for the past five centuries or so. The profound paradox is that this "extinction" has been so internalized that many descendants have been completely disconnected from their native ancestry and cultural heritage. This form of cultural genocide has been a trend for many indigenous groups, not unlike the ramifications of the boarding schools experience and enrollment policies for Native Americans in North America. These intended to transform the individual and in turn created a false image of the native. The Cherokee writer Thomas King explains that the idea of "the Indian"<sup>4</sup> was "fixed in time and space," and has been largely romanticized as an authentic view of the past.<sup>5</sup> In his summary of that distortion, "In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations."<sup>6</sup> The dominant public view of contemporary indigenous peoples automatically reverts back to this manufactured "Hollywood" type of authenticity. The fact that all peoples and cultures are vibrant and adapt and change over time has been particularly lost on many indigenous cultures. As a result, this has contributed to the false notion of a people's extinction.

But there have been dissenting voices. For instance, both my mother and grandmother had often reminded us children and grandchildren of our "Spanish-Indian" identity for as long as I can remember. This was always a curious thing to me, since there was really nothing more to the story than that. My grandmother had been separated from her Indian mother at an early age, so the cultural link to the family past had been severed. Yet, I was innately connected in some way, and growing up in a rural island environment helped. There was always a part of me that knew that things were not right, that something was missing, and this something tremendously influenced my outlook, thinking, behavior, and attitude toward life. I was shy but incredibly rebellious for some strange reason. This "missing link," other

than “testing positive” for the “shovel-shaped” tooth, would come to explain who I was as a person, where I came from, my becoming and essence as a human being. Likewise, many Boriqueños have similar stories of being told of their Indian identity at an early age, and many have maintained an unbroken cultural connection to their ancestral past. In terms of identity and the diaspora, I think poet Juan Antonio Corretjer’s famous words, “I would be a Boricua, even if I were born on the moon,” sum up the connection and nostalgia many have for their native homeland. In Hawai‘i, the foods still eaten, Jíbaro music still played, and the characteristics of the people are testament to this. Myths, memories, and stories have been also kept alive. The Puerto Rican community in Hawai‘i has always maintained a traditional loyalty to Puerto Rico. This is typical of many diasporic communities. So while Hawai‘i is their adopted home where they came to be accepted by the host Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) culture, Borikén will always be the indigenous ancestral homeland of the Boricua, wherever they may be. I would also add that I believe there is an important inherent solidarity and sense of justice between my “native self” and my activism and support for Kanaka Maoli rights and movement for sovereignty and self-determination. My “rebelliousness” and thirst for freedom has been somewhat transported to Hawai‘i and has naturally driven me to help support this important cause.

The full realization of my Boricua roots would not come about until my midthirties, when I was reading the introduction to my late cousin’s, Ronald Arroyo, doctoral thesis of 1977. Here I found out he was writing about the over five thousand Puerto Ricans who went to Hawai‘i between 1900 and 1901. This took place after the hurricane San Ciriaco had devastated the southwestern region of Puerto Rico in 1899, killing over three thousand people. Regarding the derogatory ways these people were portrayed after their arrival, he posed the question, “Who were these Puerto Ricans that they should incur the wrath of historians and writers?”<sup>7</sup> Learning from the storytellers in his family and through interviews and information ascertained from the first generation of immigrants, at a time when it was still not quite “popular” to be “indigenous,” he wrote that they referred to themselves as “Boricuas” or “Boriqueños,” that they were people who were “Boricua indians,” and that they were “proud of their indian culture as inhabitants of the island of Boriquen.”<sup>8</sup> They also identified as “*Jíbaro*,” whose origin is indigenous (“*es de origen indio*”).<sup>9</sup> Arroyo wrote the Spaniards also called them “*jibaros*.”<sup>10</sup> The Jíbaro are the people of the land, the *campesino* farmers who have tilled the soil forever. As the late Carib-Jíbaro linguist and scholar Oki

Lamourt-Valentín explained, “We are the people who call ourselves the ‘Jíbaro’ and refer to ourselves as, within the context of a nationality: ‘Boricuas’, while our country is called ‘Borinquen’ . . . from which can be seen that these are native language terms.”<sup>11</sup> I, too, have found that the indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico primarily referred to themselves as *Jíbaro*. This is the principal word, or form of the word as explained below, the people called themselves before the European arrival and the name they still call themselves today. They also identify as *Boricua*, as derived from the Indian name of the island.<sup>12</sup> The names Boricua, Boriqueño and Boricano draw on a national sentiment, used with “a tone of intimacy and endearment” in speech, poetry, popular songs, and in “all that refers to the character, customs, and sentiments of the inhabitants.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Jíbaro or Boricua are the main names I use in this book to refer to the Indian people of Borikén.

I will also use the words “indigenous Caribbean” or “Carib” as general names for the indigenous peoples of the “Caribbean” or “Antillean” region. There has been considerable controversy about naming and the division of Caribbean peoples that should be touched on here, and of which I expanded on in my dissertation. The Spaniards, like other European imperial powers, were keen to divide the people they encountered out of their own moral, political, and economic interests. I believe this was also the case in the Antilles as eternalized in the largely imagined ethnical and cultural rift created between the “peaceful Arawaks” and “man-eating Caribs.” In contrast, many scholars have argued that indigenous Caribbean groups are “closely related.”<sup>14</sup> As they “shared a common material culture,”<sup>15</sup> the social and cultural customs and practices between the two main groups were very similar. This suggests that other than slightly varying socioeconomic conditions depending largely on island topography, those present in the region were essentially of the same family of people.

What regional name did they call themselves, if any at all? Most scholars realize that the name “Taíno,” like the word “Arawak,” was not used by indigenous Caribbean peoples as a term of self-ascription. The word was used as an *adjectival*, taken from the word “*nitayno*,” which related to one’s *rank* within society, and is basically nonexistent in family histories. The name was first affixed to the people and language of Haítí by Cornelius Rafinesque and others in the nineteenth century. It became popularized in the twentieth century through the anthropological works of Jesse Walter Fewkes, M. R. Harrington, Sven Lovén, Irving Rouse, and Ricardo Alegría. However, the name “Caribes” or “Caribs” was originally attributed to a people by the Indian people Columbus came upon on his first voyage as noted in

his journal.<sup>16</sup> It is said they were referring to their “enemies,” but, as an apparent form of resistance, they were really playing jokes on the admiral and trying to get rid of him. Many scholars have attributed a Carib presence to the northern Antilles. Fewkes repeatedly does in his 1907 report.<sup>17</sup> Eugenio Fernández-Méndez pointed out that it is evident to many writers that the Carib resided in the northern Antilles in ancient times.<sup>18</sup> The Carib lived there, and the “men of Caniba,” who Columbus eventually equates to the “*canibales*,” or “man-eaters,” turn out to be the people on the *unvisited* island of *Borikén*.<sup>19</sup> As noted by Lamourt-Valentín, and others, Caniba was indeed the northwestern territory of Puerto Rico.<sup>20</sup> Expanding on the etymology of the word Jíbaro, the equivalent of the Indian name *Guajiro* in Cuba, Lamourt-Valentín explains that Jíbaro is “a native *eponymous* term for Carib (Caribbean: can/(j)íbaro - canibaro - Caribe).”<sup>21</sup> There is also a discussion of the origin of the word Jíbaro (with a reference to the word “*kanjibaro*”) in the introduction to the 1992 edition of Manuel Alonso’s *El Jibaro*, but *without* consideration of the place name Caniba.<sup>22</sup> So as can be seen above, the name Carib or Caribe emerged from Jíbaro (Canibaro), which, in turn, is derived from the place name, Caniba. When asked years later in the mountain town of Lares what name the indigenous peoples called themselves, Lamourt-Valentín replied, “Jíbaro.” “We are Jíbaro.” “We are Indians.” “We are the Caribs.”<sup>23</sup> The regional term, “Caribbean,” was further taken from the people who were living there. All in all, I therefore use the name Carib to denote the Indian people of the region.

In terms of the identities of my oral sources, while I reveal the full names of most of my interviewees, I use only the native names of others. Indian names have continued to be used over time, often as a sign of resistance to the imposition of Spanish names. Many people in Borikén have formal Indian names and *apodos* (nicknames). These carry real life meaning and stories and are most appropriately utilized in this text. Three of my interviewees wished to remain anonymous, so I use the names the “Jíbaro man,” “Pepe,” and “Cuko” to identify them. They all have their own Indian *apodos*.

Finally, I would like to explain the significance of the snake on the cover. In indigenous Caribbean tradition, the energy of the serpent represents the Earth Mother and the waters of life. It is a symbol of *continuity*, a main theme of this book, and unity of the female and male energies. The snake is also a symbol of awakening and the coming of a new era.<sup>24</sup>

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## CHAPTER 1



### A NEW VERSION OF HISTORY

*A radical history presenting a new version of the past will usually draw on new sources, even though those sources might well be “new” only in the sense that the dominant version had repressed them by never even considering them as sources. Within this model of radical history there are then two interdependent but separable moments: first, a critique of existing versions, partly dependent upon, second, the presentation of alternative and contradictory evidence. This model has its anti-colonial equivalent in the rediscovery of native sources that offer a different and revealing light on colonial events and issues.<sup>1</sup>*

The “new version” of history presented in this book is indeed not new, but one that has been repressed and, for the most part, has only recently been publicly revealed. The history of the “West Indian” is neither brief, nor is colonialism “the very base and structure of the West Indian cultural awareness,” as has been said.<sup>2</sup> The story of the indigenous Caribbean is incomplete for it has been primarily told from the point and perspective of European contact and colonial and neocolonial bias. Consequently, the most significant body of sources that have been repressed has been the indigenous peoples *themselves*. While I am partly dependent on mainstream sources, this work is an attempt to draw on *alternative* sources of written and oral information to allow, most importantly, the indigenous Caribbean voice to speak and to become better recognized, for this voice has remained silent for far too long. A Jíbaro *campesino* from Lares remarked to me awhile ago, “The history was not written by the Indians.” He said government officials have come to their communities and asked questions, but they don’t write down what the people say. If these officials gave the Jíbaro the

notebook and pen, the history would be very different according to him.<sup>3</sup> Another Jíbaro *campesino* affirmed, "The history that is written is not the real one. We know the real history." He commented that he wanted to write down or get out what he knows because many people want to "take out" what they know. He seemed pleased to be able to share some of his insight and knowledge with me.<sup>4</sup>

One of the greatest myths ever told in Caribbean history is that the indigenous inhabitants of mainly the northern Antilles<sup>5</sup> were extinguished by the Spaniards around the mid-sixteenth century. Many scholars have fallen prey to this manufactured ideology. This belief has been passed down through the centuries a priori and has dominated the mainstream outside perception of indigenous Caribbean peoples. I say "outside" referring to the dominant thought held by the outside world and by most who are non-native to the region. This is because many Indian descendents have in fact known who they are and have maintained and continued to practice their culture. Many others have had some knowledge of their background, and some are in the process of recovering their heritage. One might thus wonder how it was possible for the people who Christopher Columbus stumbled upon and subsequently committed ethnocide and genocide against to have survived the encounter.<sup>6</sup> This book seeks to unravel this dilemma. With a focus on the island of Borikén, I primarily provide a political history and ethnological account of five centuries of Carib or Jíbaro Indian resistance and cultural survival and continuity within native communities or *barrios* today. To be clear, this work debunks the deeply held belief of indigenous Caribbean extinction. *Cultural survival* and affiliation are the bases of the contemporary indigenous presence in Puerto Rico. Some key questions addressed are the following: How were sixteenth-century theories advancing the "discovery," dehumanization, and "extinction" of indigenous Caribbean peoples mythologically produced? What were the early forms of resistance and survival tactics used that contributed to the maintenance of one's human dignity and sense of equilibrium? How did passive resistance transform the indigenous population from the seventeenth to late eighteenth century? How did the Jíbaro influence and shape nineteenth and parts of twentieth-century Puerto Rican society, and what does the contemporary native voice have to say about this? And what is the meaning of cultural survival, continuity, and the movement for independence among the Jíbaro-Boricua today?

## INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN BORIKÉN

To begin, it is necessary to understand three areas regarding some principal ideas surrounding the modern-day indigenous presence in Borikén. I will call them the “authentic past,” the “revitalization process and resurgence,” and “native continuity,” periodically discussing these themes throughout the book. These areas could also be and have been applied to other indigenous groups and peoples in general. The notion of the “authentic past” romanticizes and situates the “Indian” as a fixture of a long ago past. Time stands still, which disallows for change and fuels images and beliefs like of the “red man,” “cannibal,” “noble savage,” and of an inevitable extinction. These ideas began to develop in the sixteenth century and came to dominate the perception of the indigenous Caribbean world. The early Spanish colonizers and chroniclers were most responsible for perpetuating such stereotypes and erasing the people out of the history books. Since the epistemological and ontological boundaries of the early history and literature had been written through colonial eyes, key fallacies have been passed down and unequivocally accepted by many scholars and society in general. This is symptomatic of the colonial histories written about many indigenous groups, the myth of extinction being one of the most damaging aspects of this narrative.

Ironically, the Spanish in Borikén had continued to measure certain segments of the indigenous population through census records, but the “racial triad” portrait of the “Puerto Rican” as a mixture of the Indian, African, and Spaniard effectively eliminated the indigenous presence by the end of the eighteenth century. Spanish censuses after 1799 removed the category “Indians” when the governor was “faced with the difficulty of fixing ethnic origins.”<sup>7</sup> The birth of a Puerto Rican *nationalist* identity conveniently formed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Those who set the political boundaries of the national consciousness were the colonial Spanish and Puerto Rican *criollo* elite (or “locally born whites,” according to Adalberto López), who were socially and politically conservative and displayed a “fear of and contempt for the masses.”<sup>8</sup> The “masses” here were primarily the tens of thousands of Jíbaro who remained a free people at this time, and the increasing number of African slaves being brought to the island. Not surprisingly, the push for national integration based on a capitalist-driven market economy often came at the expense of the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual values of indigenous societies worldwide. The Puerto Rican elite then came to expropriate the Indian as a national *symbol* and assertion against the Spanish



authorities. This development would “consolidate the transmutation” of the native “from a recognized group and a living population into a symbol to be revived, romanticized and manipulated.”<sup>9</sup> This cultural nationalist ideology promoted the image of the indigenous peoples as *frozen in time*, the link with the ancestral past now severed. This idea goes hand in hand with the anthropological concept of time in relation to the “Other.” According to Johannes Fabian, “The posited authenticity of a past (savage, tribal, peasant) serves to denounce an inauthentic present (the uprooted, *évolués*, acculturated).”<sup>10</sup>

For many Puerto Rican scholars today, this break in time means that while there may be “traces” of biological (or physical) and cultural characteristics, the indigenous peoples “themselves” are long gone, with no possibility or hope for continuity or recovery. It seems incredible to some how an Indian identity could be asserted within a multiethnic societal context. Archeologists are fond of displaying native skeletal remains in museums or from recently excavated sites, with *big smiles* on their faces as their photos are snapped. Yet when someone dares to make an ancestral claim to these remains, they are immediately dismissed and scorned in the process. “Our Indians” are “extinct,” the authorities say, but they certainly were here before! Richard Grounds points out how the adjective “extinct” in modern dictionaries commonly refers to animals, volcanoes, and species, but obviously not to the human species. The exception to the rule is how the meaning is applied to a certain group of humans, specifically “Native Americans.”<sup>11</sup> The *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, which Grounds cites, seems to be keen to his next point, perhaps because of the possible consequences of acknowledging a contemporary native presence, in redefining the word. “Moving beyond the original meaning of dying out altogether, the dictionary has distilled the essence of one special use of the adjective. The new meaning registered in the dictionary refers to something ‘that no longer exists in its original form.’”<sup>12</sup> Logically, this redefinition could be applied to just about everyone today, including the Greeks, Spaniards, and Americans. The idea is most relevant to our study. It is true that Indian people today no longer exist in their “original form.” As a consequence, they are often seen as nonexistent and, therefore, have no business making bogus claims and assertions. Perhaps this is one reason why the Puerto Rican elite have absolutely no respect for a people who continue to struggle and identify with their ancestors and native cultural heritage.

The second category, the “revitalization process and resurgence,” pertains to the indigenous Caribbean and Borikén, but also to the many indigenous peoples around the world who through periods of