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# Modern Taíno Tribes Are Fighting to Keep Their Culture Alive

By Miguel Machado

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The Caribbean is a beautiful place, and that beauty fetches a high price as luxury developers try to claim dominion over a piece of paradise. But a long time ago, before fancy hotels and casinos became the norm, the Caribbean islands were the home of the Taíno people. History books tell us that the arrival of Europeans brought on the downfall of that chiefdom, and the Taíno people slowly dwindled into extinction. However, there are many who disagree with that notion. Kacike Roberto Mukaro Agüeybana Borrero, president of the United Confederation of Taino Peoples and a member of the Guainía tribe, is one.

"Right now, the Taíno people would be considered the tenth largest tribe or nation in the United States and its territories," Kacike Mukaro says.

Yet the Taíno Nation is not recognized by the US Federal Government. In fact, the only government organization that currently recognizes any tribe of Taíno people as an Indigenous group is the government of the US Virgin Islands.

But why is this? And why is there still so much contention around whether the Taínos still exist and who can claim that ancestry? Well, much of it stems from the way colonial powers imposed their policies on Indigenous populations, something that the tribe is still seeing the effects of hundreds of years later.

## **The Impact of Colonialism on the Taíno Nation**

"Over the years, the way that we understand race, people, and connections to community has been affected by colonialism," says Kacike Mukaro. This is clear in the way the US government treats indigeneity. A number of criteria must be met for a tribe to be recognized federally. These "imposed" criteria make it extremely difficult for tribal peoples to be recognized.

One such hurdle is the blood quantum system in the US. Blood quantum is a way to trace the amount of Native American blood an individual has. While this might seem well-intentioned on the surface, Kacike Mukaro says there is a darker underlying truth.

"[In the 18th century] . . . there was a general consensus that if they put a limit, [the tribes] would cease to exist because more people from outside the community would come in and then finally there would be no 'blood' left," he says.

While this notion of "no blood left" is something that never came to fruition, the idea that there is no substantial Taíno blood left in islanders continues to be used by individuals and governments to deny recognition and the existence of a modern Taíno nation.

## **Spain, Trujillo, and The Paper Genocide of Indigenous Peoples**

Ramona Ferreyra, known as Guatuke Ini Inaru in the community, is the founder of Ojala Threads, a brand focused on reclaiming the Taíno heritage. She is also a "tekina" based out of the Bronx and has come face to face with resistance to the idea of a living Taíno nation. With roots in the region of Kiskeya, known today as the Dominican Republic,

Ferreyra says that the idea of Taíno extinction has been deeply seeded in the Dominican community, despite the island being the historical seat of power of the Taíno nation.

"I've always preferred to do events in the Puerto Rican community because when I go into Dominican spaces, I have to be ready to defend my existence," Fereyra says.

But while she describes having her existence denied and her regalia referred to as a "costume" as hurtful, Fereyra sees it as a byproduct of the detachment from the island's Indigenous roots. She believes that, like many misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, it stems from a colonialist mindset, one that persisted under the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to his extinction in 1961.

As she explains, "In order for Trujillo to rebrand himself as Western and white, he has to deny that there is an Indigenous identity on our island. [Before], in the cedula, you used to be able to choose 'indio' [as your race]. Trujillo undoes that."

In DR, the "cedula" is the national identity card that includes details such as the card holder's occupation, blood type, and, until 2014, their race. This kind of "paper genocide" is a real phenomenon that makes it difficult or even impossible for many Indigenous descendants to trace their lineage.

Kacike Mukaro recalls a similar paper genocide that occurred in Puerto Rico, where, in 1800, the Spanish removed the category of "indio" and added a new classification called "color pardos libres" or "free people of color."

"In that category, a person could have been Indian, Indian mixed with [another race], African, African mixed with another race, all manner of mixtures," Kacike Mukaro explains. "So it's not just that the native population died out. It's that the government removed the option."

According to Ferreyra, however, the Trujillo government's actions went further, fundamentally changing how the population was educated.

"The Dominican is told that 'el indio no existe.' Trujillo has every cabinet filled with his allies. So Dominican education is [overseen] by people who agree with him," Ferreyra , says. "It is a curriculum designed to erase."

## Climbing Back From Erasure and Preserving a Culture

Ironically enough, censuses are what have allowed the modern Taíno nation to climb back from the brink of erasure. "One of the elders in our community had stated, 'the same way that they took us out of history, we can write ourselves back in,'" Kacike Mukaro explains.

Members of the Guainia Taíno Nation have gotten involved with the US Census in an effort to create engagement and raise visibility around its importance. This, coupled with the Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination as allowed by the Indian Self Determination and Education Act, has seen the number of self-proclaimed Taíno's rise over the last 30 years, totaling 112,682 folks in the US and its territories as of 2022.

But ancestry is only one aspect of what it means to be Taíno — what it means to walk the path of Indigeneity. Another aspect is culture: having spaces for the practice and development of language, art, song, and spirituality. In Austin, TX, Kacike Tekina-eirú has created one such space, turning a Puerto Rican cultural center into the heart of a thriving Yucayeque.

"I started the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, [and] for many years we had mountain traditions and bomba and plena, and bailes de salon ... but I was always sad knowing that the heritage that meant the most to my heart I had no way to transmit," says Kacike Tekina-eirú.

Like many with Taíno ancestry, her journey started in the dark, with no idea how to connect with what she knew. Her grandmother, Marcela Serrano, was visibly Taíno, yet aspects of the culture hadn't been passed down to her. So, she found a teacher.

That teacher, Kacike Cacibaopil Martin Veguilla passed away last year, but Kacike Tekina-eirú continues to carry on his legacy. Along with composing plenas and other forms of folkloric Puerto Rican music, Tekina-eirú composes Taíno "areytos," ceremonial dances with important spiritual connotations. She also clarifies that the "yucayeque" that has evolved around the cultural center isn't just some eclectic educational off-shoot. It is also an example of Taíno people not simply preserving their culture like some object in a museum, but rather living it. It is a space where they connect to their cemís and can reinforce their connection to nature, the land, and each other.

"For me, the beauty of a yucayeque is that personal time and togetherness," Kacike Tekina-eirú says.

## **The Indigenous Path and Its Implication on the Modern World**

For Taínos like Mukaro Agueybana, Guaktuke Ini Inaru, and Tekina-eirú, Indigenous roots are more than just heritage. It is the path that they walk, one that has real-world implications.

For example, what happens to Taíno bones and artifacts when they are uncovered? How should we engage with sacred caves in the Dominican Republic? Tribe members like Kacike Mukaro and Guatuke Ini Inaru are trying to ensure Taínos have a say in these matters. However, the Indigenous mindset extends beyond solely Indigenous matters to many of the hot-button issues at the forefront of modern politics.

Whether it is public lands being privatized throughout the Caribbean, the impact of factory farming and processed foods on our health and environment, or the lack of affordable housing, the Taíno tribe members see these as problems created by the same type of colonial capitalism that tried to erase them from history. They see these as problems that can't be solved through a colonial mentality but only through a greater connection to the land and each other — a tenet of Indigenous identity.

Indigenous identity isn't monolithic. It is a mosaic, of which the Taíno people have never stopped being an important part of. And they will continue to be as they fight for their recognition and to lead us into a world where we are more at one with nature, ourselves, and one another.

Image Source: Miguel Machado

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*Miguel Machado is a journalist with expertise in the intersection of Latine identity and culture. He does everything from exclusive interviews with Latin music artists to opinion pieces on issues that are relevant to the community, personal essays tied to his Latinidad, and thought pieces and features relating to Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican culture.*

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