

THE MYTH OF INDIGENOUS  
CARIBBEAN EXTINCTION

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

Tony Castanha

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THE MYTH OF INDIGENOUS CARIBBEAN EXTINCTION

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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 indigenuous 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

Lamour-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 Haiti 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 *Guaajiro* 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 Jíbaro*, 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>