

# An Attempt to Erase: Colonial Histories and Contemporary Indigenous Identities in Cuba

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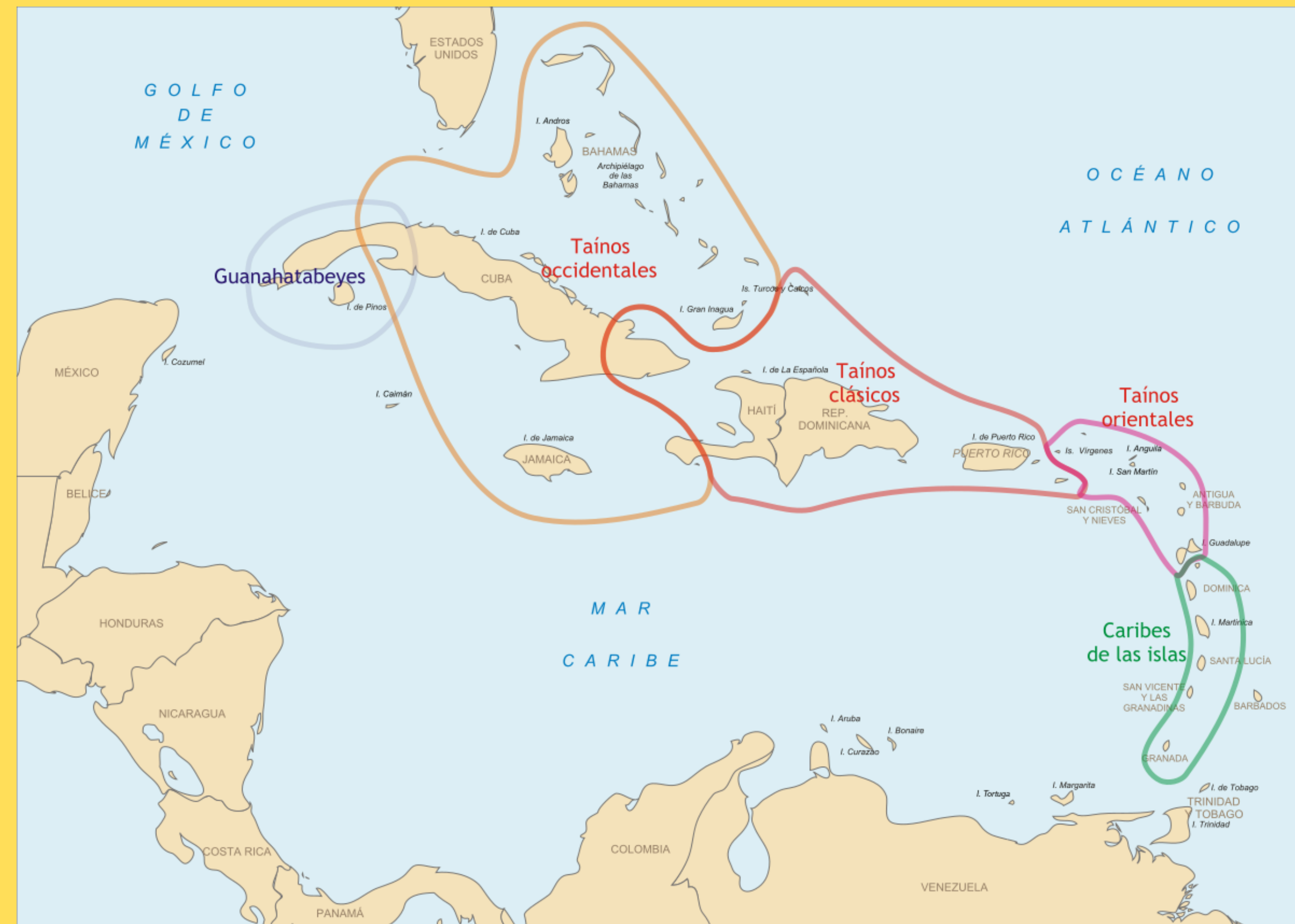
## Introduction

This study seeks to investigate the complex history of Indigenous peoples in Cuba, exploring how this legacy influences modern perceptions of Indigenous identity. Since the 1970s there has been a growing movement among Taíno peoples, particularly among the Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban diaspora in North America, to reclaim their Indigenous heritage and assert their existence, challenging the long held myth of a post-Columbus Indigenous extinction in the Caribbean. Within Cuba, this movement has taken shape, but its manifestation is multifaceted and influenced by unique socio-political dynamics and concepts of identity. Despite the presence of Taíno ancestry in Cuba's population and culture, the acknowledgment of Indigenous identity has faced challenges amidst a narrative of extinction and ideals of the Revolution, which prioritize Cuban identity over other racial or ethnic distinctions.

Drawing from my experiences during the 2023 Cuba Ethnographic Field School and a review of the available literature, I aim to elucidate the intricate interplay between colonial historical production and contemporary Indigenous identities in Cuba. In addition, this research aims to think critically about the complex dynamics of Indigenous tourism occurring alongside cultural revitalization in the Cuban context.

## Who are the Taíno?

- Cuba was initially uninhabited until around 5000–4500 BCE when small groups of Indigenous peoples began arriving, followed by increasing waves of Indigenous settlers, including Arawak-speaking agricultural peoples broadly categorized under the umbrella name 'Taíno.'
  - Interacting with the existing inhabitants of the Caribbean, they established hierarchical and complex communities across Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the Bahamas.
    - Pre-1492 population estimates of Cuba range from lows of around 112,000 to highs over 400,000, though these numbers are highly contested.
- The ruling elite, known as *cacicques* were largely (but not exclusively) male and inherited their positions matrilineally.
- Taínos practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, clearing forests to cultivate crops like yuca, sweet potatoes, beans, and peppers among other fruits and vegetables.
  - They utilized diverse tools and artifacts, including earthenware pottery, stone axes, wooden clubs, hammocks, baskets, and pendants made from gold. Animal protein in their diet came from fishing and hunting, utilizing canoes, nets, harpoons, and hooks.
- Taíno religion is animistic, associating elements of nature with specific deities. Shamans called *behiques* led religious rituals and healing ceremonies, utilizing fasting, vomiting, tobacco, *cohoba* inhalation, and medicinal plants.
  - Communal artistic rituals called *areitos* included music, dance, storytelling, and the consumption of tobacco and fermented beverages.



Yavidaxiu. (2008). Distribution of Taíno, Caribbean and Guanahatabey Arawaks in the Antilles, at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ta%C3%ADnos.svg#mw-jump-to-license>

## The Impact of Colonization

- In October of 1492, Columbus and his men landed on Cuba, forever changing the island.
  - First encounters between Caribbean Indigenous people and colonizers are recorded and told almost exclusively through the latter's perspective, providing little insight into the experiences of Taíno people at the time of Columbus' arrival.
- After a short period of coexistence, the processes of colonization began. Spaniards removed men from their communities to be enslaved in gold mines and colonial plantations. Taíno crops suffered and their stores of food were often raided by colonists, resulting in widespread starvation.
- The introduction of foreign diseases exacerbated the struggles already facing the Taíno and many thousands began to succumb to these illnesses. Many more were brutally killed at the hands of the Spaniards or chose to commit suicide to avoid subjugation.
  - In Cuba and much of the Caribbean, depopulation rates are estimated to have exceeded 90 percent within a few decades of contact with Europeans.
- The destruction of Taíno communities resulted in a reshaping identity among those who survived. Many Taíno women intermarried with Spanish colonizers and gave birth to mixed, or *mestizo*, children. Some enslaved Taíno and African people fled to maroon communities and escaped Spanish authorities by living in caves in the mountains.



Benzi, G. (1565). Taíno women preparing cassava bread. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ta%C3%ADno\\_women\\_preparing\\_cassava\\_bread.png](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ta%C3%ADno_women_preparing_cassava_bread.png)



Plischke, H. (1892). "Kanú der Indianer." [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rudolf\\_Cronau\\_Kanú\\_der\\_Indianer\\_1892.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rudolf_Cronau_Kanú_der_Indianer_1892.png)

## The Power of Historical Production

- Informed by a strong historical consciousness, Cuban's perspectives on Indigenous identity have evolved through a nuanced interplay of oppressive colonial narratives, revisionist histories, and the ideals of the Revolution.
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (2015) illuminates how silence is a powerful tool that permeates the process of historical creation across its various stages.
  - From the selection and construction of sources to their archival compilation and subsequent narrative formation, history undergoes retrospective shaping that produces "bundle[s] of silences" that exert authority over those who do not have the privilege of controlling historical production (27).
    - Taíno populations undoubtedly suffered at the hands of the Spaniards, however, it is the historical narrative of their complete extinction, inscribed as fact in Spanish records, that furthered the impact of the genocide. Denying their existence allowed Spaniards to invoke the principle of terra nullius, justifying the dispossession of their lands and resources. This had lasting effects on the recognition of Taíno identities.
- Even after gaining independence from Spain at the turn of the 20th century, Cuban historians explored the issue of where Cubans should seek authenticity and integrity in their history, considering the nation's dual colonial experience under Spain's formal rule and the USA's informal dominance.
  - In 1945 Cuba's National Congress of History aimed to correct the portrayal of Indigenous Cubans as cowardly, arguing that evidence of their uprisings against Spanish rule had been intentionally suppressed by the Spaniards. This recognition was important, but it still did not change the narrative that Taínos were extinct.
- With the Revolution in 1965, the re-examining and revision of colonial histories became a key part of the regime's propaganda efforts to highlight Cubans' long history of resistance to oppression and foster a unified sense of Cuban identity.
  - Indigenous contributions to Cuban culture were recognized, but their unique cultural identities were still subsumed within the broader Revolutionary ideal of a Cuban identity that emphasized national solidarity above individual cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

## Taíno Resurgence Within Cuba

- Despite efforts to re-examine the history of Indigenous Cubans, their ongoing existence was/is still largely denied within Cuba. The Revolutionary ideal of a unified, "raceless" Cuban identity, shaped by centuries of ethnic and racial blending, has minimized the recognition of Indigenous identity by those with or without Indigenous ancestry.
  - There are many Cubans with Taíno ancestry who engage in traditional cultural and spiritual practices they have inherited, particularly in the more rural eastern areas of the island. However, they are more likely to identify themselves as Cuban descendants of Taínos, not Indigenous people.
- Consequently, the Taíno resurgence movement largely emerged outside of Cuba, within the Caribbean diaspora. Influenced by North American perspectives of race, identity, and Indigenous activism, the resurgence of the Cuban Taíno identity became an important part of the global Indigenous movement for decolonization and reclamation.
  - The colonial narratives of Taíno extinction have significantly hindered amount of information available to those who are trying to reconstruct their Indigenous identities within Cuba. This has resulted in many people doing their own personal research, comparing familial and local knowledge with the historical accounts of Spanish colonists and archaeological interpretations.
  - Community education programs led by Cuban archaeologists are becoming an important part of reconnecting to Taíno knowledge and encouraging an interest in Indigenous histories and their enduring impact on Cuban culture.
- The resurgence movement has also been shaped by an increased foreign interest in Indigenous tourism, which has led to criticisms of inauthenticity.
  - Cuba's economy is heavily reliant on tourism and there are communities who are willing to leverage their perceived Indigeneity, performing reimagined Taíno ceremonies and dances for paying tourists that are self-described as "more fantasy than fact" (Gulley 2016).

## Conclusion

The resurgence of Indigenous identities in Cuba is a journey fraught with challenges in the wake of historical colonial legacies. Despite obstacles posed by narratives of extinction and the complexities of cultural identity, Cuba is embarking on a path of reexamining its Indigenous past. The global Taíno resurgence movement, rooted in reclaiming heritage and challenging historical narratives, reflects a broader Indigenous activism. As efforts to reconnect with Indigenous knowledge gain momentum, there is hope for a future where Indigenous voices are recognized, valued, and celebrated in Cuba's cultural landscape, fostering greater understanding and appreciation of its rich Indigenous heritage.



Giroux, H. (2023). Cuban archaeologist Roberto Orduñez Fernández, showing some of the Taíno petroglyphs in a roadside cave in Barigüé.

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