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Hemispheric Journal: Cuba - Indigeneity in El Oriente, 2012

"The Indian is with us, around us and in us."

-- Jose Juan Arrom, Caribbean scholar

Indigeneity is a complex concept, increasingly important to define. I carried the thought with me for two weeks through a good portion of eastern Cuba, the fabled "Oriente Cubano" that is cradle to the Taino presence on this embattled island, and from which have sparked the major rotors of Cuban history. ¹

The journey, in early 2012, I first conducted on my own and then with Cuban historian Alejandro Hartmann, whom I have been privileged to join in the documentation and networking of Cuban indigeneity for over two decades.

If Cuba is a caiman, as claimed in its poetry and reflected in its shape, Oriente is the wide and spiny triangular head pointed to its snout. The snout looks east across the Windward Passage to Quisqueya (Haiti/Dominican Republic), Borinquen (Puerto Rico) and points southeast. The three islands are linked

¹ Peter Hulme, "Cuba's Wild East: A Literary Geography," Liverpool University Press, Feb 15, 2012, Pp. 120-123

in many ways by Taino indigeneity -- as foundational thread (and identifier) -- before it transcultured with populations from Iberia and Africa, migrational waves joined over the centuries by people from the full spectrum of human nationalities.

Taino describes the first people encountered by Columbus in the Americas, as well as the broad civilization of the indigenous Caribbean. Taino is also at the genesis of Jamaica, Bahamas and keys and islets among and around them. Taino, or Island Arawak, anchors the language of the Garifuna in Belize, carried from St. Vincent by their Kalinago-Arawak grandmothers. Taino is the most common, identifiable term in the identification of Caribbean indigeneity.

In Cuba, particularly in the Oriente, indigeneity has considerable continuity -- more than was ever studied throughout the 20th Century. This phenomenon has been mostly obscured. A rather distant scholarship, constrained by a telescoped vision of "indianness" and limited scientific tools, plus the required repetitiveness of academic textuality, still mostly deny the presence of this Caribbean root.

The search for purity of culture and race in the study of indigenous peoples has too often compelled researchers to move on from considering subjects as Indians-worthy-of-study once racial or ethnic "mixing" (mestizaje) became evident. The search for the "pure" in cultural and racial study of Native cultures sustained way past the time when no less interesting cultural configurations were evolving, not always in the by-way of extinction but actually offering new-blended combinations, often layered with indigeneity of unexpected resiliency.

Indigeneity, we can posit, survives in mestizaje. The approach to just what is "indio" or better yet, what is "un Indio," is increasingly multi-dimensional and has persistently moved on from the rigid "raza pura" norms characteristic of anthropology's expectation-of-extinction era. Indigeneity imbeds not only in the classic American Indian cultures but also within the layered ethnicities of most of our nation-countries.

Within the Cuban transculturation, particularly in the eastern provinces, these manifestations of indigeneity are worthy of identification and study. In this context, "indigeneity" is most useful as a concept that describes legacy of belief and practice, rather than as synonymous with "indigenous" in the racial or ethnic, or even legalistic sense. We can identify, thus, an indigeneity that survives in mestizaje. Indigeneity imbeds not only in the classic American Indian cultures but also within the layered ethnicities of most of our nation-countries.

Given the NMAI's stated mission of recognizing, documenting and presenting the living cultures of indigenous peoples, the exploration of Caribbean indigeneity, presently resounding in popular expression in Cuban culture, is of considerable interest. As we work to develop and contribute to a museology of respect with indigenous peoples, we penetrate in a variety of ways with the factors of indigeneity that now allow us to navigate range and depth of autochthonous rootedness such as is manifesting still today in the Cuban Oriente.²

² Beyond Cuba, in the Greater Antilles and the Caribbean generally, the exploration of indigeneity is very much in evidence. The Smithsonian research project, "Caribbean Indigenous Legacies," studies this topic throughout the Circum-Caribbean. Over a dozen multi-disciplinary scholars collaborate in the project.

2. Factors of indigeneity ...

My earliest discussion on the concept of indigeneity was with the Seneca Nation philosopher, John Mohawk. At a session of the MacArthur Foundation's "Indigenous Voices" initiative, a think-tank hosted in spring 1991, to discuss themes for enabling an indigenous peoples representation during the hoopla days of the Columbus Quincentenary, Dr. Mohawk defined the concept of indigeneity as descriptive of the *culture of indigenous primary relationship with the natural world*. He introduced a definition based on the idea of a community's local-specific production and its quotient as foundation in the use of eco-systemic materials to undergird some level self-sufficient (Domestic Mode of Production [DMP]) economy.

Dr. Mohawk's thinking on land-based, indigenous economics has been pronounced. **It carries a nugget indigenous perception about living on the earth not at all intended as a limitation of or imposition of primitivism but rather as "liberation" from colonialism and utilizing old and new technologies to pursue a proper and autochthonous attachment to place. Dr. Mohawk defined as the main vein of "thinking in Indian," a philosophy and practice of self-sufficiency on local, community and regional trade levels. A broad range of issues among indigenous peoples and, often, of *campesino* communities, involve the loss of natural resource bases, including forests, lands and water, due to commercial rapaciousness couched as westernization and modernization. While there are plenty of examples of**

indigenous communities depleting natural resources, a strong ethic of natural world adaptation, an appreciative and productive relationship with the land is a recognizable current of traditional American Indigenous thinking. This thinking is held up in spiritual ceremony and grounds a practical and always evolving tradition for creating economic value, prescribing the sustenance of a safety net of food, fuel and medicine security. ³

I shared that definition over the years with Dr. Mohawk and, especially for regions such as the Caribbean, have found the human-land-nexus definition useful beyond the purely racial-ethnic concept (say, American Indian or Australian Aboriginal, or even Taino). Defining groups of people by a primary ethnic identity sets up polemical clash around inclusivity - exclusivity issues. This tends to limit and often paralyzes the discussion of people's land-rootedness relative to daily culture and eco-systemic quotient of life. Nationalities such as those that create the Cuban gens are intensely layered culturally. The nuanced sustainability of identity through oral culture, particularly within so-called "race-crossing," has limited the understanding of indigeneity in Cuba and within Cuban-ness (cubanía). (The phenomenon extends to the Quisqueya-Dominican Republic, Boriquen-Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Haiti, all national names rooted in Taino language). New analytical tools are needed that can help "read" the lay of the land and understand a different dimension of the Cuban (and by extension Caribbean and Latin American) cultural landscape. "Indigeneity," thus defined, can provide us one such tool.

³ Jose Barreiro, Ed., 2010, "Thinking in Indian: A John Mohawk Reader," Fulcrum Publishers, Golden, Pp. 55-56.

Indigeneity: in the Americas, the quotient in the culture of a people that grounds contemporary thought and practice in the residual and sustaining knowledge of living in primary relationships to the land and to the natural world -- inherited culture and ideology from both pre-Columbian and post-contact indigenous ancestors, through transculturations and through the generations.

Max Forte reminds us that the term, indigeneity, "remains necessarily slippery" ... "there is as of yet no consensus" on its definition, but should be "distinguished from indigenous-ness, which can connote a static 'state of being.'" Indigeneity, for Forte, is also, "used to refer to some notion of being locally-rooted" and "bundles discourses and practices of the indigenous."⁴ This expands on the definition suggested by Garifuna scholar Joseph Palacio, which perhaps to succinctly states: "indigeneity" ... as ... "the status of being indigenous."

In this "bundling" conceptualization, indigeneity becomes an important prism for study of persistence of natural world uses and adaptations by indigenous biological and cultural descendants blended with other land-based peoples (Iberian and African) with particular attention to the thoughts and spiritual, nature-linked connotations inherent in those practices. In a culturally layered context such as the Caribbean islands, accommodating the adaptations of cultural change and influences from varieties of origins is necessary. The concept of

⁴ Maximillian C. Forte, "We are not extinct": The revival of Carib and Taino Identities, the internet, and the transformation of offline indigenes into 'N-digenes', Sincronia Spring 2002

indigeneity is intended to engender within a multi-disciplinary methodology an approach to the study of continuities of indigenous thought and practice among transcultured American populations and practices today. In seeking to perceive more clearly the inheritance from the pre-contact Taino (indigenous) ancestor culture, the prism of indigeneity helps to identify and understand the adaptations of new and colonial practices by the early Taino-informed generations, practices which transfer into and inform the proto-guajiro or proto-jibaro mountain people of the larger islands, from which flow essential currents of national identities.

Indigeneity is thus defined here as identifying descriptor of that which survives of indigenous and eco-systemic use and practice, thought and/or belief in particular regions and enclaves as well as in the general population of the Caribbean. It seeks to untangle the braid of multiple and distinct "Taino Consciousness" continuities detectable in people and cultural trends and manifestations.

3. In the spiritual culture ...

My recent island journey explored indigeneity in the spiritual culture of eastern Cuba, el Oriente. Accompanied by Cuban scholar and museologist, Alejandro Hartmann, my research partner of 23 years, we sought to visit localities known for concentrations of Taino populations during the colonial era. From Camagüey east to Holguin, through Santiago to Jiguaní, El Caney, to the coastal Cave of Atabei(ra), on the tip of Cabo Cruz, a ten-day expedition offered a rich cross-section of

encounters with tobacco *curanderos*, "four directions" ceremonialists, *rastreros*, *paleros*, *cordoner*os, artists and other people from Indio-descendent community and families who are variously rooted in an indigeneity of animistic or "world alive" spirituality.

- El Caney (formally San Luis de los Caneyes, Santiago de Cuba)

Pedro Mangana, 94, "curandero por rastro," a healer of the "tracking cure," received us in a pig corral he was building for his family. Barefoot, dark-brown, of a self-professed Indian family, don Pedro, his wife and family greeted us with modest affection. Their community of El Caney, formally, "San Luis de los Caneyes," today partly overrun by the growth of Santiago de Cuba, is a historically recognized, early-organized Indian settlement and "pueblo," enclave of hundreds of Taino families.

The visit with the Mangana family was doubly fruitful as don Panchito Ramirez Rojas, his wife Reina, daughter Idalis and son Vladis accompanied us. This visiting group is core of a leadership family in la Rancheria in Caridad de los Indios and other pueblos of the nearby Sagua-Baracoa cordillera, particularly the clan of Rojas-Ramirez who have a long documentary history as "Indios" of these Cuban mountains. I have published on Cacique Panchito extensively and am happy to report him alert and mobile in the spring of 2012, at the age of seventy-eight.⁵ He and other elders from the area of Caridad de

⁵ See Jose Barreiro, "Taino Survivals: Cacique Panchito," in "Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean," Maximillian Forte, Ed. Peter Lang Publishers, 2006, Pp. 21-40.

los Indios have provided much testimony on spiritualist and practical approaches to their land ("Mother Earth"), agricultural self-sufficiency and other elements.

At El Caney, don Pedro is a venerated elder, with a respected and widely known reputation as a curandero, much as Panchito is in the mountains of nearby Guantanamo. Don Pedro's special gift is a ceremony that I have also known in Camagüey and Guantanamo, called by its practitioners as "la cura del rastro," or the "healing by track" ceremony. At his homestead, once we had met the family, which immediately gathered a dozen people, don Pedro modestly revealed that he has held his ceremony since the age of fifteen, over seventy-five years. He announced to his gathered children and grandchildren that this was the first time anyone had come to ask him questions. As he was "getting old" (*poniendome viejo*), he said, he would sit and grant us an interview about his "the gift" (*el don*) he received from the "mountain forest" (*el monte*) long ago.

The area of El Caney, near Santiago de Cuba, was reported to be populated by Taino early in the contact days, hence the Taino term "caney," which describes the circular, thatch-roofed bohio (malocca, in Amazon) characteristic of a Taino settlement. For three generations after the Spanish arrival, while many fled to the mountains, most of the area's Taino families worked as servants and field slaves in colonial encomiendas. With the passing of the "New Laws," in 1550, the Spanish court granted liberty to Indian slaves in the Antilles. The town of El Caney was founded by official cédula (writ) of 21 March 1551. The law establishes the Indian people's right to "elect Indian mayors

and judges ... [be provided with] adequate farmland and cattle ... a 'protector of Indians' ... a church ..."⁶

The Indian town of El Caney survived with its own jurisdiction for three hundred years, until around 1850. It has consistent documentary history as one of the early formalized Cuban Indian settlements. From its early history, constant encroachment by Spanish settlers on this Cuban Indian reserve generated friction and legal cases. As usual, the conquistador class, in charge of the courts, ruled consistently against Indian complainants. The court-sanctioned land thefts led to an Indian rebellion in 1758. Although largely contained, the tumult focused Spanish King Charles IV on his Cuban backwater. The Spanish sovereign ruled for the Indians right to their land base and, in 1796, even sanctioned their public "protector," a man named Jose Valverde, for being in cahoots with the colonial hidalgos.⁷ Still, over the next fifty years the power of the hacendados usurped many Indian farms piecemeal and succeeded in diminishing the legitimacy of an Indian-based common title. However, that El Caney is only disbanded as an Indian pueblo in 1850 gives clear indication of a notable Indian jurisdiction of common-lands holdings surviving into late colonial times. Although officially the "Indio" designation was retired, as was the Indian land title, many families retained ranchos and homesteads in individual title. In this community,

⁶ Hortensia Pichardo: en (1989): "Los Orígenes de Jiguani", en: *Facetas de Nuestra Historia*,. Editorial Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, pp. 77-100; p. 81. See also, Olga Portuondo: "El hombre, lugar y Época. Santiago de Cuba y La Habana, p. 18, en *Nicolás Joseph de Ribera*. Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La habana, 1986. Colección Palabra de Cuba, pp 5-36

⁷ Olga Portuondo: "Una sublevación de indios en 1758", en *revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*. La Habana, No 1, enero-abril, 1981, p. 199-204.)

although "checkered" by residents of other heritage, Indian families did not disappear.

A long line of travelers and scholars have transited and left testimony of Indian identity in El Caney. Our trip, only the most recent, also records continuity of local Indian identity. This should not surprise: **a Spanish census in 1775 counts as "full-bloods" ninety-two percent of El Caney, some 530 out of 570 heads of families. This documentation, overlapping into the early 19th Century, describes a substantial Indian population base for a supposedly extinct community.**

Ethnologist Rolando Pérez has detailed the historical presence of this population as well as the continuity of endemic crops recorded in those early times in El Caney, "fruits such as guava, mamey, papaya), gardens, tubers such as the yucca ... the cultivation of tobacco in fields, cattle and fisheries ... the craft of basketry, hat-making shoemaking and carpentry; also trade by mule and horse caravans."⁸

Interestingly, an 1890 visit by Cuban naturalist Carlos de la Torre reports no Indians left in El Caney.⁹ But only a decade later, a 1902 visit by University of Pennsylvania professor Stewart Culin yields an interview with Indian elder, Jose Almenares Argüello, hardy at 112 years, who notes that El Caney was full of Indians in his generation. In 1901, he is considered the only Indian, which is defined racially and limited to "full bloods." For the record, Culin reports one hundred

⁸ Rolando Pérez Fernández: "El culto a la Guadalupe entre los indios del Caney" en *Del Caribe*, No. 29, 1999, Casa del Caribe, Santiago de Cuba, p, p 64.

⁹ Carlos de la Torre: Conferencia Científica," *Anales de la Real Academia de Ciencias Medicas, Fisicas y Naturales de La Habana*, vol. XXVII, no. 315, Ppp. 325-343

Indian families at Dos Brazos and six or seven hundred Indian people at the town of Yara, rather than the total "400" for Cuba cited for him in the 1948 Smithsonian "Handbook of the South American Indian." Culin, who was generally disappointed to not find "wild Indians," notes a crucial item in the preference for matrilineal naming of children when reckoning lineage in the Indian settlements he visited around Baracoa. In nearby Yateras, a brief visit yielded testimony of a large group of Indian families in the mountains still governed by caciques, though Culin did not visit the caciques, nor did he conduct any lengthy interviews with the elders he met.

- El Caney, 2012 ...

Don Pedro spoke softly, almost inaudibly. He was not shy, just soft-spoken. Sitting in the bosom of his family, surrounded by his wife, and granddaughters, he told us the story of his healing power and tradition. As we sat down, Hartmann asked, "Is yours an Indian family of El Caney?" Don Pedro shrugged and nodded. "Yes, of the Indian line of El Caney." Behind him, his wife also nodded softly. "Tenemos de indio," she said. *We have of the Indian.*

Not far from the pig and chickens corral where we found don Pedro, gardens of Cuban tuber crops such as yucca and boniato were planted. Guava and other fruit and medicinal trees abound in the general area. These types of Cuban barrios, once isolated pueblos, now overrun by cities, are considered "urban," as they have electricity and accessible roads, but often, small-scale, mostly self-consumption agriculture, including animal

husbandry, is detectable. **This continuity of lifestyle with a high quotient of eco-systemic adaptation and domestic food production -- regardless the ethnic identifier of the individual practicing it -- is a marker of indigeneity.**

"My medicine is a gift, from nature," don Pedro began. "I don't cure anything; she, the nature, cures. I think, because my mother had it, and [because] ... I feel so much pity for the people choking up (asthma) ... the gift is with me and stays with me. "

He began "cutting" at the age of fifteen, and has been doing his ceremony for over seventy-five years. The first time happened at dawn one morning when he entered his sister's house for coffee to find his five-year-old niece in acute asthma attack. "It was pitiful, she was choking so badly. What to do -- my ceremony -- came to me at that moment. I said to my sister, 'I now know what to do. Find me a knife and a scissors.'"

He picked up and carried the asthmatic girl into the woods. "I curved this way, and that way, walking in long spirals, then coming down a knoll I saw it." Here don Pedro made a big embrace with his arms. "It was a large tree, very large and wide *almácigo*. She was there, waiting and I went to her. I knew from her just what to do." (He used the term, *la mata*, rather than *el arbol*, to describe the tree, thus the feminine usage.)

The young don Pedro had asked the tree to heal the girl with its healing power, and then performed his ritual.

"She did not choke from asthma again."

"Not an elder taught this to you?" I asked.

"No, not my ceremony. That came to me at that moment, with the tree." He would expand later that his mother was also a healer had been a strong influence on his faith. "My mother was a dreamer; I did know her gift for healing."

And the asthmatic girl, his niece?

"She is still around. She is now almost eighty years."

The elements of don Pedro's ceremony are identifiable with those that describe the "tracking cure" or "cura del rastro." The origin of this ceremonial tradition is not well studied, yet it is a long-established belief complex found among guajiros and people of the *monte* throughout the Cuban Oriente. The ceremony is rich in recurrent elements yet varies among different "trackers," or *rastreros*. Rastreros are quite secretive about divulging any aspect of their ceremony. The instruction is to only teach two others in his lifetime. The attitude reveals intensity of belief and commitment to their spiritual practice. It also confirms the oral nature of the intergenerational knowledge. Socarras (2010) details testimony about rastreros in nearby Camagüey province; similarly, these don't accept payment, can not teach more than two apprentices, work prayers with the track and with a connection to the four cardinal directions. Socarras pays homage to early "Guanahatabey" progenitors as origin of some to the oral knowledge he captures.¹⁰

¹⁰ Denis Socarrás Estrada, 2010, "Los Saberes Guajiros de mi Sabana Cubana," Pp. 101-108, Publicaciones del Área de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada de la Universidad de Alcalá, de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) y del Centro de Estudios

Don Pedro, because of his advanced age, was comfortable speaking on his life as a healer. Still, he sought our explicit understanding that 1) he is not the one that heals, that "nature heals," and 2) in all of his life, he has "cured thousands of people, but never, ever have I accepted one payment, one penny or even a gift, for my spiritual work. This I can not do. It belongs to nature, not to me." Don Pedro's strong expression of personal dignity was a recurrent theme with all the curanderos encountered in this journey. Rastreros are said to live long. Don Pedro claims never to have been afflicted by illness in all of his 94 years. The old man has a strong grip. "I get up with the sun and I work every day," he says.

Always, the tracking cure involves a major Cuban tree, in don Pedro's case, the "almácigo," (*Bursera simaruba*). Among guajiro farmers in Camagüey province to the west, the "guasima" (*Guazuma ulmifolia Lam*) is used in the tracking cure ceremony; other rastreros go to the "ceiba" (*Ceiba pentandra*) as their healing tree. The ceremony and its special prayers are conducted for people, particularly asthmatic children, and those afflicted with parasites or infection; it is done for animals with infected parts and for field crops, particularly beans, needing relief from insect plagues.

Nearly eighty years after don Pedro's first ceremony, he is still an active rastrero. "At one time I tried to ask people asking for the ceremony to only come on Fridays. But there are too many who need healing; I still 'cut' three, four days a week. The

"cut" refers to an important part of healing ritual. In the case of an asthmatic child, don Pedro's ceremony calls for taking the affected child to his almácigo tree, where he is made to stand, back to the trunk, as the rastrero takes his measure upon it.

As we spoke with the elder a crowd gathered that included the father of a ten year old boy who don Pedro had "cut" about a year before. He sent home for his son, who soon appeared. Don Pedro then offered to walk us to a nearby farm, where his current almácigo tree stands and where he had performed the ceremony on the boy. Hartmann's team filmed as don Pedro once again stood the boy against the trunk of his sacred tree, measured him and then mimed a scissor motion to cut a lock of the boy's hair, precisely from the cowlick. With the knife, an incision into the bark is lifted and the twist of hair is placed inside it. The bark is then closed tightly on the tree. Don Pedro makes his first prayer, repeated softly by the boy, over this offering of hair (sometimes accompanied by tobacco seeds) to the tree. The tree is first purified of hostile force, then implored to make the cure. Once "cut" and signaled into the bark, the boy is asked to walk swiftly away without looking back while don Pedro continues to pray at the tree. Don Pedro gently slaps the tree with both palms and then with one palm, whispering his orations.

Throughout the late morning, several people from El Caney -- at his house, at the tree, and in a short visit to a second Indian home -- offered testimony about cases of relatives and friends cured from asthma by don Pedro's rastro ceremony. His practice and particular gift are widely known and appreciated in the community.

With this visit, we could certify that -- in April 2012 -- the identity of "Indio" continues to be asserted and manifested among families in El Caney. From among these families, we identified and interviewed don Pedro Rufo Mangana, an elder curandero. Of impeccable integrity and substantial community respect, at 94 years of age, he is a rastro who still fulfills a consistent demand for his healing ceremony.¹¹ The fact of the healing ceremony, don Pedro's standing in his community and the nature-orientation of his practice, grounded in his self-identification as Caney indio, evidences obvious indigeneity. The rastro ceremony itself shows similarity to practices by Venezuelan guajiro (Wayu) and also to "cura del rastro" practiced by campesino in northwest Argentina, an area with strong cultural links to Guarani and Andean tradition. The ceremony is also no doubt conjoined with Iberian pastoral and religious practice. Finally, the invocation of a tree's healing power recalls reference Taino behiques (chamans) speaking with and drawing medicine from powerful trees in the 1496 treatise by Friar Roman Pane.¹²

At the sacred almácigo tree, don Panchito Ramirez, cacique and curandero from the nearby mountain community of Caridad de los Indios, his wife Reina and their adult son and daughter, offered a song from their family to the elderly healer of El Caney. "We will sing our Indian song for you, our healing

¹¹ A case I documented for Camagüey province also involved the use of a major tree (guasima), the cutting and inserting of hair from the head of the patient into the open bark of the tree. Additionally, the Camagüey ceremony used the tree's shade and the foot track of the afflicted person.

¹² Jose Juan Arrom, Pané, Fray Ramón 1999 [1571] An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians. 1999 edition with an introductory study, notes, and appendixes by José Juan Arrom ed. Translated by Susan C. Griswold. Duke University Press, Durham and London

song," Panchito said to don Pedro. They sang a song to their spiritual work. It said, in part, "I work with the Moon, I work with the Sun / Sun and Moon -- loan me your splendor."

"I respect it all," don Pedro told them. "I respect your song and thank you for your song. It is also ceremony."

- Jiguaní ... "the golden river"

At El Caney, we visited specific homes of Indian descendants. These dot the area of El Caney. We also can document a nature-based ceremonial complex, "la cura del rastro," and a particular *rastrero* of Indio origin. However, at El Caney, I did not hear of any type of organized or associated group that is specifically identified for their indigenous ancestry.

In Jiguaní, a town two hours away from Santiago, our group was received precisely by such a circle. An energetic group of several dozen families has organized to uphold, document and investigate their Indian cultural ancestries. With the Jiguaní town historian, Lic. Hugo Armas, as primary host, numerous individuals greeted us, expressed themselves and requested dialogue. The group, a loose *asociación*, first greeted Hartmann and I in 1997, when we stopped by for a visit. Later in 2005, we brought Cacique Panchito to Jiguaní at the request of historian Armas. That was an unusual encounter among indio-identified families of the Cuban Oriente, whose economic conditions don't easily allow for this kind of travel. The 2012 encounter is even more intense. The group is eloquent and direct in their passion for discussing Jiguaní indigeneity.

Jiguaní is another one of the historical Indian towns in eastern Cuba. Founded as a "pueblo indio" on January 25, 1701, it long projected its identity through Cuban history, prominently in the independence wars of the late 19th Century. The Jiguaní Town Shield still depicts a Taino man in rebellious posture. Historian Armas details Jiguaní's origin, stemming from a lawsuit in Spanish courts by Indian cacique Miguel Rodriguez, who gathered Indian families in surrounding mountains to found the town.

Our visit turned into a day-long exchange over several sessions. The small hall at the Jiguaní Culture House filled with elder people of the various barrios of the municipality, who, since 1989, have re-organized to share their knowledge and identity as Indian families.

Many gifts were exchanged, stories of grandparents and of healing ceremonies, old dances. A woman spoke about her family's participation in the Danza del Cordon or Dance of the Chord, a centuries' old ceremony that invokes "commissions" of spirits and is done in the form of the old Taino *areito* or ritual dances. "Our step in this area, for this danza, is one foot forward, one foot back, like that. We call that our Indian step. We believe it's the old areito."¹³

One Indio man who made several gifts of his wooden carvings, pulled me aside during a break. On a corner of a

¹³ Jose Antonio Garcia, et al, "Huellas Vivas del Indo-Cubano," (2da. Edición: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 2007), traces the ethnological elements of the contemporary "Dance of the Chord," to the *areito* or Taino ceremonial dance.

hallway he had a table with several objects. He showed me several amulets of stone, with a large, white stone from "my mother's altar." His mother was a medicine woman, he said, *curandera*. She had been dead for nearly five years and he had been waiting to share the medicines she left. She had taught him her *costumbre*, but he had not spoken of this to anyone. Out of respect for her, he was still reluctant to practice himself.

The family retains a small farm, deep in the monte. "I have four sacred trees, worked by my mother in ceremony," the man says softly. "She worked with the moon and the sun, and especially the land, plants and medicines, and even a small stream."

A woman who stood with us told me. "I am not religious, don't go to church. But I believe like he does. Many people here are like that. We have our family stories." She wanted the young people to write down the stories.

I fully encouraged what they were doing. It was clearly self-generated, not quite focused by the government one way or another, as they say in Cuba, "*una cosa de la gente*" -- a thing of the people. In Cuba, faithfully, one may expect that the ever-vigilant political system will contemplate and gauge all social trends. The impetus by Cubans to encompass their indigenous legacy -- such as it is and it should not be over-stated -- manifests particularly in the areas of more intense Indio-descent. It is significantly of itself -- sui-generis -- and conditioned largely by oral tradition and regional consciousness "de lo indio" (indigeneity) in their eco-systemic and healing practices. Since I share the legacy, to the *curandera*'s son, I said: "If you feel clear

with it, do it," recalling the impetus expressed by the old *rastrero* of El Caney. "If you feel the pity for the people and the strength to help them by serving the spirit, that's the signal to practice your ceremony."

The encounter in Jiguaní gathered an interesting cross-section of people, several from campesino families, adults who work in health, also in journalism and education, students. Their commonality: all stem from families where the oral tradition strongly grounds in a sense of Indo-cubano ancestry. "This is just the core group," Armas represented. "Many more people would come, if the announcement goes out widely." Two municipal officials stated that they were both there for personal reasons, but openly curious and happy that the municipality is starting to hear from their people about their preoccupation for their Indian heritage. "The government needs to pay attention to this anxiety," one said.

Young people brought up study projects: about interviewing elders, studying medicinal plant uses, tracing the genealogies of the town. Even an old *conga* from the town's carnival repertoire, called, "Los Indios de Jiguaní,"* which sings of its Indian pride, is again in demand, thus revived. One detail of the town's population: among the oldest families in the municipality, there was a danger that close inter-marriage can cause malformations in children. "The more pronounced Indian families, old area families, they are kinship-bound. They don't like to marry out," historian Armas mentioned. "It has been an issue among other Indian enclaves," Hartmann commented. "Small very self-identified kinship populations, they wish to marry in the group. Its natural but can be problematic."

The assembled delegation walked to the Jiguaní River, to continue the conversation outside, and precisely at the place where historians signal the town's founding event. This second discussion continued to emphasize the commitment of the group and the town of Jiguaní for reconnecting the indigenous knowledge of their people. One to-the-point question wondered on why people have let go of so much their traditional Jiguaní Indian identity, why for so long people shied away from declaring their Indian-ness.

"The Indian was called a dog, savage, primitive, ignorant, stupid, lazy!" was one response. "Of course, people shied away from being insulted so publicly." This engendered a telling exchange on the many positive sides of "our people's knowledge." The group stayed with a focus on the practical value of traditional knowledge; the wealth and well-being engendered by having the capacity to produce from the land and be self-sufficient. It was notable how invigorated the group (now joined by a street-crowd) became through conversation that valued their old people and what they know, that celebrated rather than denigrated the value of that type of eco-systemic knowledge for domestic production of food and medicine, utensils and tools, house construction, and other skills. This intense reaction about the value of land-based culture and food self-sufficiency can be seen as a marker of indigeneity in any ethnic group. It is a long recognized American indigenous community value and most particularly notable as manifested by an Indio-identified group.

"We have many things Indian that are around us, we eat and drink and even dance Indian, and most of us don't even recognize who we are," said an older woman.

Panchito Ramirez spoke to that issue. "As a Cuban Indian, and as a farmer, conuco man," he told them. "This is most important. Planting on the Mother Earth, talking to her. All my children believe that way. It's the way I taught them; and how my grandparents, all Indios, taught me."

Among the ideas that surfaced at Jiguaní a proposed gathering for indio-identified families from Caridad de los Indios, Jiguani, El Caney and other communities for three days of cultural encounter, music and dance, culinary demonstrations, crafts and discussion circles.

Conga:

"Los Indios de Jiguaní" *

*Es cosa que pregunta la gente /
es cosa que pregunta la gente*

*Y yo como prudente, le voy a contestar:
Y yo como prudente, le voy a contestar:*

*somos los indios de Jiguaní /
somos los indios de Jiguaní*

*que comemos mucho bollo
y de harina de maíz*

* This conga song is accompanied by a procession carrying a thatched Taino caney (home) structure, costumed dancers and an Indian princess mounted on a white horse.

- Niquero and the Cave of Atabeira (Hatuey)

Early morning call and long motoring west out of Santiago took us past Jiguaní, past Contramaestre and Bayamo, Yara and Manzanillo to Niquero. We skipped the high country, traveling on the foothills of the Sierra, touring by the eastern plains cattle country where state cattle farms largely replaced the corporate ranchers of an earlier era. Here and there, a private family farm, sometimes as a family cooperative, has survived the ups and downs of socialist planning. Cattle tend to do best in the family farms. After decades of neglect, large swaths of grassland have gone to "marabú," an aggressive, impenetrable, spiny, deep-rooted brush. Current policy is granting abandoned land in usufruct to private citizens, who are in struggle to eradicate the marabú, and put up family farms. Many of these people are from former guajiro farming families removed only by one or two generations to more urbanized centers during the height of the social revolutionary population mobility. They are returning to the land and in fact many hold still considerable range of "guajiro" sense and knowledge to make many more such traditional homesteads work again. Cuba has not forgotten that the small farmer families, the guajiro, produced their way

substantially for Cuban society through the worst moments of food deprivation after the fall of their main trading partner, the Soviet Union. Since 1989, the unfortunate and largely self-inflicted paralysis of Cuban agriculture, was recognized; a new trend emerged to confront food insecurity in Cuba with the preservation of oral traditions and practices found in the culture of the land-human nexus of the island.

- Hatuey -- Taino Cacique and Primordial Hero

There was a necessary stop at Yara, the place where the Taino cacique, Hatuey, was captured and burned at the stake by the Spanish conquistador, Diego Velazquez.

This is of deep meaning for all Cubans, and perhaps particularly for this region of Oriente to the plains of Camagüey. At Yara's small central plaza, we find the statue of Hatuey. Panchito spots it first and calls for a stop. We pile out. "Oh, look, Hatuey," Panchito tells his grown children. It is a wonderful statue, in the middle of Yara, small town, yet resonant to the national consciousness.

Two major events in Cuban history occur here: the Death of Hatuey, beginning of the oral tradition of the "Luz de Yara," and, some 350 years later; the "Grito de Yara," or the Cry of Yara, which marks the start of the Cuban independence wars against Spain on October 10 1868, when criollo plantation owner, Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, modern Cuba's founding father, freed his enslaved Africans and workers, and declared war on Spain. Cespedes, although luminary, is surrounded and

framed by a long line of Cuban patriot heroes. Hatuey, however, is foundational, singular in his death at the pyre of freedom, and evolved convincingly only in the Cuban apostle, José Martí, also consumed not far from here, in sacrificial death (1895). The Dominican patriot, Maximo Gomez, principal general of the Cuban Independence is by his birthplace also naturally linked with Hatuey.

Hatuey -- of Quisquilla origin -- is core to the understanding of Cuban indigeneity. He is our earliest national mythohistorical hero, a defender not only of his Taino land, both in Quisquilla (Hispaniola) and Cuba, but more importantly a resistor of conquest in ideological and spiritual terms.

Hatuey came from his Haitian Taino cacicazgo (chieftainship) to warn the Cubans about the coming Spanish, with whom he fought a rear-guard action, finally retreating with 400 of his people, crossing the 50-mile passage to Cuba on canoes. Thus, around 1512, the historical and eventually legendary Hatuey traveled among the Cuban Taino, with whom he shared a common culture and language, although not a strong enough sphere of influence. His visit to the Cubans is an oral tradition in the Oriente and his story is chronicled by Father Bartolomé de las Casas himself. Both history and legend state that he asked the Cuban Tainos to gather their ceremonial gold and toss it in baskets to the waters of rivers, as he reasoned that the shiny metal was the true "god" of the conquistador, as the sight of it unleashed his fury to possess it.

Conquistador Diego Velazquez pursued Hatuey to Cuba with a hundred Spanish troops armed in grenades, arquebus and

attack dogs. Early sources, including Father Bartolomé de las Casas, report that Hatuey evaded Velazquez for about a year. Hatuey fought a contentious guerrilla war, killing ten of the conquering forces, until a local traitor led the Españoles and their war dogs to him in a surprise attack. Tied to a pole facing out, cushioned with dried wood, just before execution by fire, Hatuey listens silently as a Spanish friar offers him baptism, which, he is told, will guarantee him entrance to the Christian Heaven.

Hatuey asks, "And the Spanish, where do they go?" "If good Christians, they go to Heaven," answers the friar.

"Baptize me not," affirms Hatuey. "I prefer Hell rather to be with such brutish people."

The story of Hatuey has deep meaning for a wide strain of the Cuban personality and fixes three "teachings" that are elements of regional and even national character: 1. Rejection of invasion by force through the land-rooted nationalistic posture; 2. Suspicion of the greed for gold as primary motivation; 3. Assertive manifestation of popular nature-oriented spiritual beliefs and practices beyond or at least overlapping the reach of Catholicism.

These foundational values that accompany the Hatuey legend in eastern Cuba predate the socialist revolution, the era of the republic, in fact, all of colonial history.

- Niquero - Indigeneity Encounter ...

Five hours of early driving through the oriente, past Bayamo and Manzanillo, took us to Niquero and the warmest of receptions, formalized through the office of the "historiador," Valentin Gutierrez, and drawing from a broad circle of interest in spiritual tradition and healing ceremonies.

We had barely arrived and directly the talk of spirituality and healing traditions was on. Doña Digna, respected healer, and her husband, are introduced. The couple, in their mid-sixties, is serious, calm, quickly surrounded by others.

"First of all, we are so happy you have come, all of you, to talk about Indian things, and about our spiritual traditions."

"From seeing you and what you express, I wonder if you are Indians?"

"Around here, we all have that blood, more or less."

The elder couple are renown for their healing gift, Valentin informed us. Their effectiveness to cure patients gained them access and entrance to the government clinic. They have an office and wear a medical gown to work with patients that request their help.

"We both cure. Our ceremony is not complicated. We touch lightly, invoke our spirit and the touch of the Creator. At first my gift was for skin lesions, particularly herpes infections. In time, other diseases responded to my ceremony."

"She is in the curing first, longer than me," the husband said. "She led me to see I too was gifted. So I heal now too."

The group made a wide circle, some thirty people. All introduced themselves and testified to their reasons for participating. Most, including the well-liked local historian, Valentin Gutierrez, spoke of indigenous *sangre en las venas*, "blood in the veins." All mentioned experiences with parents and grandparents that included "culto" to nature spirits, assertions of "somos indios" and attention to caves as places of connection with the spirit world. All also spoke of cultural ways still among the people, and even of specific healing episodes where Indian spirits directly intervened. Several mentioned belonging to Dance of the Chord traditions. This ceremonial complex, found at various points throughout Cuba, is particularly strong in the Manzanillo-Niquero-Bayamo area. It is emerging increasingly as a recognized cultural space of convergence for several Cuban spiritual traditions. Foundational and prominent is the indigenous element, manifested in the structure of the music and the dance as well as in the shamanistic context of the curing moment and the invocation of a commission of Indian spirits.

One man, a "moreno," an established and widely used term for a dark-skinned person, spoke directly about his Congoli ancestry. "Many people here today, some are my life-long friends, can claim Indian blood," he said. "I don't. I know my people's line pretty well and there is no Indian. But in our region, I can say this, there are many, very active Indian spirits." He was a seer, and at the age of nine an Indian boy spirit of the same age appeared to him. He has other spirits, mostly African

or Afro-Cuban, but the Indian spirit he met as a child grew old as he did, "and in fact, he is right here, next to me, and is my same age now."

This kind of expression is not uncommon in the region, for Afro-Cubans and Hispano-Cubans to individually and via religions to express an affinity with Indian spirits. This man was a *palero*, or practitioner of the Palo Monte religion. More properly Palo Monte *Mayombé* is an Afro-Caribbean tradition with origins in a region of the African Lower Congo. In its incantations, it uses many terms from Kikongo, a Bantu language with continued expression into present-day Caribbean. "Palo" describes wood sticks used in its rituals and also alludes to the tree of the mountain. Palo Monte syncretizes elements of "world alive" or animistic belief and spiritual connection to ancestors. "My Indian spirit does not like for me to say his name; that is only for me to know; so I can not divulge it," he said. Also: "When I feed all my spirits, my Indian spirit likes very much the fruits of Cuba, and the meat of the jutia (tree-dwelling rodent)."

It was that kind of circle. In Niquero, where I had least expected it, an intense Indian descendant group came out to greet us and testified to a wide range of belief and practice that invokes both Indian kinship and Indian-inspired spiritual connections in a range of ethnicity. In the transculturation of essences, indigeneity emerged among both self-declared Indio and African descendents. The encounter of ceremonial practitioners gathered in a region known for its curandero tradition. The claim of descendance by generations from the early Taino populations of Macaca, a casicasgo visited by

Columbus during his second voyage, is not isolated to individual families and appeared to find social acceptance.

Among the circle of people, most with strong testimonies of Cuban Indio ancestry, there were nurses, teachers, dance students, a literature student, a policeman, an archeologist, two writers and others.

Panchito spoke again, a master of Indio leadership, actual cacique and introduced as such to the group. He welcomed that the healers and the "seers" are coming out and talking. "We are Indian, all my old people were Indian. I like it much hearing from your people here, and seeing that you are Indian too." Panchito and I were invited to present the book, "Panchito: Mountain Cacique," that was published in Santiago de Cuba in 2001.

We were milling about after a short merienda when another Indian family arrived and we gathered again. "This is special," said Valentin. A mother and daughter stepped forward. The girl, about nine, brown face, long black braids, is shy and alert. The mother has the girl and her two older sisters sit and stands behind them. All, particularly the young women, were classic American Indian profiles.

"This is a special something we all here in this group know about," said Valentin, with the mother's nod. "A spiritual something we all respect very much."

The story emerges. It is about "the cave," a particular cave almost to the tip of the nearby coastal cape, called the Cave of

Atabeira. This cave, Valentin explained, is inside an archeological park called El Güafe. "This cave has a lot of meaning, very spiritual to our people."

From Niquero to that westernmost tip of eastern Cuba at Cabo Cruz is a dry, coastal region, with many cave systems, unique marine terraces. Cave systems throughout the region -- and many points throughout Cuba are associated with Indian spirits.

The Cave of Atabeira, long known in the region and studied by archeologists since the 1970s, is particularly strong that way -- a sacred ceremonial place. It is a 100-foot deep cavern that holds a pool of water from which emerges a carved stalagmite in the image of the sacred Taino mother of fresh waters, Atabeira. Central female deity of the Taino pantheon, she is mother also of the supreme being, Yucahuguama Bagua Maórocoti, and associated with fertility of nature. In Cuba, she is the Taino cultural personality tied into the multicultural braid of the Catholic matron, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre.

People in the area of Niquero continue to visit the cave and make offerings and requests of the spiritual representations of the place. It is considered "alive," and powerful. When people report dreams of Atabeira, these are taken seriously.

The nine-year-old girl, presented by her mother, is named Atabeira, after the sacred deity. Her own mother dreamed about Atabeira during her pregnancy with the girl. "She came into my dreams many times," the mother reported. "I even dreamed about the cave and saw her as she looks there. She wanted

daughters, she said. I asked if I should name her that. She said that I should."

The girl, her sisters and their mother all feel a special affinity for the cave of Atabeira. The mother is a teacher from a big family. The spiritualists around them support the family and remark on what is occurring with them as "something special." The girl is highly considered and respected and also somewhat mesmerized by the affection.

Valentin, the girl and the mother stood to address our visiting group. "This of the girl named Atabeira we speak because you are here, perhaps you have your own orientations about a situation like this."

- Atabeira ceremony at the cave

It was an unexpected revelation -- deeply personal, yet a community discussion, now opened to the visiting guests. A family based dream sequence, a mother's vision reflected in the name and person of a young woman, open to our thoughts and recommendation.

"The girl is noble, like the rain," Panchito whispered in my ear. "The young girl was in fact very calm and gentle, modest in the fact of so much attention. We agreed to think about the girl together as grandfathers of large families.

You could tell the young woman and her family were completely sincere. The group had made a respectful request.

Panchito, who is a social healer as well as cacique to his widespread clan, quickly involved me in his response. "A cleansing of the girl and a prayer for the water mother, Atabeira."

"We would want you to run it for us; join your ceremony to us," said the mother.

"For your daughter, and for Atabeira, our mother of waters," he said.

Drought was also in his mind. The drought is becoming cyclical here. I encountered a bad one in 2005. In Spring 2012, the drought was just as severe. On Panchito's mountain, across the large head of Oriente, the week before they had lost their first ox (buey) to drying pastures. Others were endangered.

"At the cave," the mother requested. She looked around to all the men and women surrounding her. "At the Cave of Atabeira. We should go there; take my girl."

A truck was called for, the large group jumped on board and we followed in our bus. Along the way, in a kiosk, we found cigars, the Cuban "tabacos" Panchito required for his Four Directions Prayer. I carried copal, which Panchito always prefers for the altar fire. As we have done before, on the way, we designed the basis of a response to their request for a ceremony and orientation for the family and the girl.

The ride to the cave, at the tip of the province of Granma, passed over the landscape of not only a stopover by Christopher

Columbus in his second voyage (1494) but also of the (1956) landing of the rebel force led by Fidel Castro in his campaign to overthrow Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The area is now a historical and an archeological park, "Landing of the Granma," named after the yacht that carried the force from Mexico to land, intentionally, in this remote area of Cuba. We note the Park's replica of Fidel's famous yacht as we pass on in ceremony to the ancient Cave of Atabeira.

The Cave of Atabeira is a living sacred space. At the bottom of steps that descend for 30 meters, Atabeira herself is found in a pool of pristine water, carved onto a stalagmite. She faces out and locals say on the winter solstice (December 21 to 22) sunlight illuminates her face. Protected from vandalism, hopefully into the future, the cave is visited by a few tourists and by local people. Different local groups make offerings and request favors from Atabeira. Our ceremony lasted a good hour; the prayer was for rain, relief from the drought, for Atabeira to intercede. It was sincere and the whole group, clearly practiced in ceremony, provided their attentive concentration. Panchito and his family sang their songs to Atabeira. Panchito emphasized -- in advice I would carry to the mother and the girl and her sisters -- to be clear that Atabeira was the entity, the spirit powerful from ancient times. We should remind the family, he said, that the girl was named Atabeira, but was not the deity Atabeira. This was important, we emphasized, because a nine-year-old girl has the right to her childhood as a regular girl. The mother and the girl appreciated the orientation, we enjoyed a meal together, a few more hours of discussion before returning to Santiago.

The consciousness of Atabeira and particularly in her ancient Taíno place revealed an unexpected level of indigeneity in the area. It surprised and refreshed to hear an oral memory of an early Taíno deity, still identified in the context of fresh water and rain, remembered and celebrated. The sentiment and ritual attention is sincere and genuine even if the antiquity of the ritual in place is likely untraceable and thus forever contested. What I can report is that in Spring 2012, in the westernmost corner of eastern Cuba, the tip of Cabo Cruz, a group of spiritualists from the town of Niquero evidenced a high sense of indigeneity and even presented a core of visitors with a situation and a case of an indigenous-origin family seeking to clarify an experience of spiritual connection to a Taíno place sacralized by the early contact ancestors as a temple to Atabeira.

Epilogue ...

The travel chapter, "Indigeneity in the Oriente: 2012," reports on a recent ten-day trip through several communities in eastern Cuba, the fabled Oriente. It is one of many experiences logged with Cacique Panchito Ramirez Rojas since 1995 and with co-researcher Alejandro Hartmann since 1989. This recent journey archives even further relevant experience in Camagüey Province, there the "tracking cure," the güije or "little people" and other interesting traditions are alive and well; we have other chapters, too, in the contestations of indigeneity, and the consciousness of Taíno in the Cuban Oriente. Beyond the reports on the spiritual healers and their specific missions, all enveloped in strong naturalist context, I can report a flowering of expression in the identity of the Indian-indigenous ancestral

legacy, blood and heart, along with the pronouncement of spiritual connectivity and practico-magical medicinal knowledge.

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