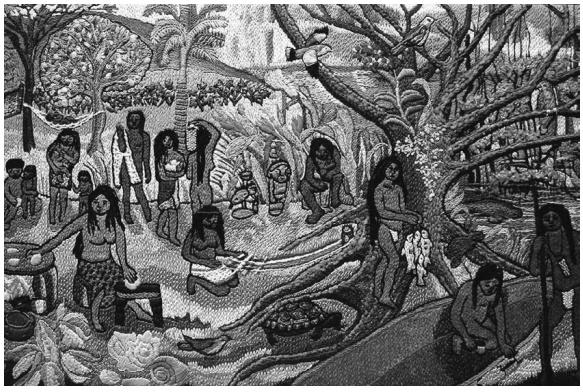
Investigating Discourses of Indigeneity and Taino Survival in Jamaica

Shenhat Haile 2T1
University of Toronto
FAS History, Political Science & African Studies

ABSTRACT

In Jamaica, the longstanding notion of indigenous extinction through colonial violence and subsequent intermixing with enslaved Africans has led to widespread debate on the island regarding the legitimacy of Taíno survival. Colonial narratives attesting to the absolute decimation of original inhabitants throughout the Caribbean region have arguably created stagnant understandings of indigeneity in Jamaica into the 21st century. This paper seeks to investigate complex conceptualizations of indigeneity on the island and explore the ways in which the myth of extinction has persisted into the post-colonial period, along with the challenges related to the reconstruction of Taíno histories in Jamaica.



Taino Village Tapestry by Jamaican artist Merck Bowden (2009)

Keywords: Indigeneity, Jamaican history, Taíno revival, Maroons, Caribbean indigeneity

BIO

Shenhat has a BA from the University of Toronto with a double major in History and Political Science and a minor in African Studies. Her academic interests include history and politics of the Horn of African, anti-/alternative development theory, and intellectual histories of Caribbean decolonization and transnational Black radical feminism.

This paper seeks to investigate ongoing discourses of indigenous survival in Jamaica and efforts to contest enduring myths of Taíno extinction on the island. Colonial narratives attesting to the absolute decimation of original inhabitants throughout the Caribbean region have arguably created stagnant understandings of indigeneity in Jamaica into the 21st century. As a result, entrenched misconceptions about the disappearance of Jamaica's native Taíno population have continuously been reproduced in academic literature. Despite current efforts to revive indigenous histories, many factors contribute to the challenges faced by scholars and community leaders in reconstructing Taíno histories on the island.

I will first briefly explore the ways in which the myth of extinction has persisted into the post-colonial period through exclusionary knowledge production rooted in colonial accounts. Ongoing interdisciplinary work has emerged in recent years to halt reproductions of this narrative, thus allowing national discourses on Taíno survival to shift accordingly and suggest a hopeful future for indigenous cultural revival in Jamaica.

Complex conceptualizations of indigeneity vary across the Caribbean region. In Jamaica, the longstanding notion of indigenous disappearance through colonial violence and subsequent intermixing with enslaved Africans has led to widespread debate on the island regarding the legitimacy of Taíno survival. In order to identify the challenges that exist for communities to assert their indigenous ancestry in Jamaica, there must first be an understanding of the ways in which formal institutions continue to uphold historical myths of an alleged extinction.

Modern-day Jamaica is a nation predominantly composed of an African-descendant population.[1] Nevertheless, depictions of the indigenous Taíno on the Jamaican Coat of Arms (1962) gives recognition to the varying cultures that have once populated the land.[2] Unlike the complex public discourses of cultural

[1]Jada Benn Torres, and Harcourt Fuller, "Investigating the 'Taíno' Ancestry of the Jamaican Maroons: A New Genetic (DNA), Historical and Multidisciplinary Analysis and Case Study of the Accompong Town Marroons." Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 43, no.1 (2018): 48.

[2]Erica Neegangagwedgin. "Rooted in the Land: Taíno identity, oral history and stories of reclamation in contemporary contexts." AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples 11, no. 4 (2015): 377.

[3]Jorge Duany. "Making Indians out of Blacks: The Revitalization of Taíno Identity in Contemporary Puerto Rico," in Gabriel Haslip-Vera, Taíno Revival: Critical Perspective on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics (2008): 57.

nationalism and politicized Taíno revitalization in nearby Puerto Rico, the Taíno of Jamaica have been historically regarded as simply a relic of the past, non-existent in contemporary Jamaica.[3] In scholarly publications as recent as 2018,[4] the notion of Taíno extinction endures as a supposed historical truth. Taíno disappearance has been concretized throughout decades of academic literature and has only more recently been approached as a matter of debate. Discussions surrounding indigenous survival have largely centred around varying historical accounts on the origins of Maroon communities and their intermingling with native Taínos. As a result, it is important to consider the ways in which Maroon communities have come to stand in for the perished indigenous population and how theories of intermixing have denied the possibility of prolonged survival.[5]

In escaping enslavement and forming new communities in the Jamaican hinterlands, the existence and survival of Maroon societies are recognized as one of the most notable early instances of successful resistance to colonial rule in the Caribbean. The myth of extinction can be traced back to 1520, where Spanish documentation estimates the swift and total decimation of indigenous populations resulting from violent enslavement, disease, and genocide.[6] Elimination of the native population ultimately deemed the land terra nullius – unoccupied and subject to justifiable land expropriation from colonial powers. This effectively allowed for a separation of Taíno and African histories on the island, in which it is argued that slaves assumed the labour needs of the Spanish left vacant by indigenous erasure.[7] Therefore, many scholars of Maroon communities have left little room for the possibility of Taíno survival based on these colonial historical accounts. Barbara Kopytoff's (1976) analysis on Maroon ethnicities claims that various elements of different West African cultures may have come together to create unique Maroon societies.[8] She argues the likelihood that indigenous inhabitants survived in small numbers on the interiors of the island, yet their entire "contribution to the Maroon stock was doubtless very small, and their cultural contribution appears at present to have been negligible."[9] While other Caribbean historians such as Sylvia Wynter suggest that a process of acculturation may have taken place, in which remnants of indigenous groups and Maroons "mingled in a common resistance,"[10] on the island's peripheries, she ultimately credits Maroons with "humanizing" the land left by Taíno disappearance.

[4]Gaama Gloria Simms. "Maroon Indigenous Women Circle, Jamaica: Historical Recurrences from Indigenous Women's Perspectives." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018).

[5]Kathleen Wilson. "The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound." *The William and Mary Quarterly,* Third Series, 66, no. 1 (2009): 61.

[6]Torres and Fuller, "Investigating the 'Taíno' *Ancestry of the Jamaican Maroons*."

[7]Atkinson, Lesley-Gail, ed. The Earliest Inhabitants: The Dynamics of the Jamaica Taíno. Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press (2006): 164.

[8]Kopytoff, 46.

[9]Ibid., 38.

[10]Sylvia Wynter. "Jonkonnu in Jamaica." Jamaica Journal4, no. 2 (1970): 36.

In its place, Wynter offers an argument she believes to be more fitting for the process in which Africans come to claim a connection to this land – that is, a process of "indigenization." From this framework, it is evident how Maroon communities begin to be characterized as the sole resistors to colonial violence on the island. The British invasion of Jamaica in 1655 thus "solidified the Maroon reality as the indigenous people" according to Wynter.[12] Unlike their Taíno counterparts, Maroon survival complicates national conceptualizations of indigeneity in Jamaica. In a 2018 article published for the Journal of International Women's Studies, Simms refers to the Maroons, Rastafari, and Revivalist as the three indigenous groups of Jamaica, in which the Maroon are the "Godmother of all indigenous cultures in Jamaica."[13] These historical narratives – while on the surface, appear to reconsider the myth of extinction at the onset of European contact – merely reproduce accounts of indigenous non-existence by maintaining their minimal and insignificant association with early Maroon societies. I will later explore the efforts that have been made to counter colonial narratives that disentangle Taíno and Maroon histories of collaboration and survival.

The presumed fact of indigenous disappearance is also further embedded in academic literature regarding historical processes of cross-cultural contact in Jamaica. Complex discourses of creolization have offered frameworks in which the internal diversity of Caribbean nations can be examined.[14] While the term "creole" carries shifting definitions across time and space, Carolyn Allens (1998) investigates how imported populations in the New World, sharing common experiences of colonialism, fragmentation, and domination, engaged in finding new ways of belonging through the invention and adaptation of cultures.[15] She describes creolization as "a common pattern",[16] holding distinct connotations and applications depending on the region. The 19th century use of the term was often employed to denote one's racial status and relationship with the land as native or foreigner.[17] Despite the intricacies of this discourse in academia, many scholars base their analysis of Jamaican creolization in the myth of indigenous disappearance and the cultivation of new "native" cultural practices and languages. In James A. Delle's (2000) analysis of nineteenth century creolization in Jamaica, he simplifies creolization as a "theoretical concept used to explain processes by which European and African populations adjusted or adapted to conditions in the New World."[18] .

[11] Ibid.
[12] Wynter, 36.
[13] Simms, 245.
[14] Carolyn Allens. "Creole Then and Now: The Problem of Definition." Caribbean Quartery44, no.1/2 (1998): 36.
[15] Ibid., 44.
[16] Ibid., 36.
[17] Ibid., 37.
[18] James A. Delle."The Material and Cognitive Dimensions of Creolization in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica." Historical Archaeology 34, no. 3 (2000): 56.

Additionally, he maintains it can be defined as a "cognitive process of defining a distinctly Jamaican social identity on the parts of both European and African peoples.[19] In a similar way, Sylvia Wynter identifies creolization as a phenomenon in which African cultures operate as the "crucible of the cultural deposits of the immigrant peoples, transforming borrowed elements of culture into something indigenously Caribbean."[20] The basis in which understandings of creolization (a processes that is generally accepted to accurately describe the ongoing experiences of African, European, and Asian populations in the Caribbean) ultimately reproduce narratives of the impossibility of indigenous survival and their subjugation to histories solely of conquest and genocide. In Delle's analysis, he emphasizes creolization as "a special form of ethnogenesis in plantation contexts." [21] Shona Jackson (2012) highlights how "labor plays a role in becoming Creole," [22] in which post-Columbian populations (in the Jamaican case, Black and Afro-creole populations) are brought into academic discourse and given legitimacy as founding members of the modern nation state to which they are able to yield state power, arguably at the expensive of indigenous peoples.[23]I nvestigations into the processes of creolization in Jamaica have largely focused on the cultural contacts between post-Colombian populations, especially African and European, while failing to consider the role of indigenous Taíno cultures within these paradigms. Moreover, these discourses surrounding Maroon ethnogenesis and the exclusionary nature of creolization studies have arguably aided in the ongoing denial of Taíno existence in contemporary Jamaica. Despite the role of scholarship in entrenching these myths, examining the ways in which recent discourses have challenged these enduring colonial narratives may give greater insight into the seemingly hopeful future for Taíno cultural revival on the island.

The effort to disrupt the widely accepted notion of indigenous extinction in Jamaica has been interdisciplinary. In the academic sphere, this work has been undertaken by historians, archaeologists, and geneticists seeking to develop a more informed understanding on the enduring legacies of pre-Colombian peoples and cultures in Jamaica. For instance, Lesley-Gail Atikinson's 2006 editorial compilation of archaeological study into the earliest inhabitants of the island aims to challenge misconceptions about the Jamaican Taínos resulting from insufficient field research.[24] Specifically, she cites a number of factors inhibiting academic inquiry into historical Taino sites and inadequate efforts at conserving existing ones as a major contributing factor preventing histories of indigenous survival in Jamaica from being recognized.[25]

---

[19] Ibid
[20] Wynter, 38.
[21] Delle, 56.
[22] Jackson, Shona N. Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean. University of Minnesota Press (2012): 47.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Atkinson, 7.
[25] Ibid.

In a chapter of the text investigating Taíno ceramics from post-contact Jamaica, the author contests the myth of Taíno disappearance with a careful examination of archival documents in which census records report "Indian" populations alongside enslaved Africans in Sevilla la Nueva in 1533.[26] While colonial narratives assert indigenous extinction by as early as 1520, these records suggest that Spanish authorities were considering possible ways to re-settle the remaining Taíno natives elsewhere on the island.[27] Further archaeological evidence suggests small Taíno populations present at the site during this period.

Shifting disciplines, advancements in the field of genetic testing have also played a significant role in confronting the notion of indigenous extinction. Valid criticisms exist regarding the use of mtDNA (mitochondrial DNA) as an analytical tool for uncovering the histories of genetically diverse populations, and the adverse political implications of reviving or reconstructing these histories cannot be understated.[28] Nevertheless, a study published in 2018 by Fuller and Torres investigates the extent to which Jamaica Maroons can trace their ancestry to indigenous Tainos. More specifically, the study builds on the growing debates amongst scholars regarding the intermixing of these two populations, seeking to validate these claims through genetic testing.[29] Self-identifying Jamaican Taínos such as Dr Erica Neeganagwedgin have been publicly ridiculed and mocked for their efforts to reclaim a lost heritage.[30] Genetic inquiry into Maroon populations therefore seeks to address the "longstanding antagonisms between oral history, colonial writings and contemporary scientific evidence."[31] The study's findings confirm the presence of Taíno DNA lineages in today's Accompong Town Maroons, therefore supporting the theory of communal relationships that existed between indigenous and African populations during the colonial period.[32] The researchers maintain, "DNA is simply a testament to genetic exchange between African and non-African peoples."[33]

However, as these new studies emerge, it is critical to ensure genetic findings to do not inspire a regression into essentialist discourses of Taíno existence in Jamaica. As Dr. Neeganagwedgin herself states, reviving the colonial pseudoscience of blood quantum is not the objective ?[34] rather, there must be an understanding that after five centuries of extinction myths and ethnic intermixing, Taíno people and cultures do not exist in their "authentic" and undisturbed pre-Colombian forms. The ongoing endeavor, therefore, is not to disentangle indigenous histories from those of the Maroons in order to identify modern-day indications of cultural

[26] Ibid., 164.
[27] Atkinson, 164.
[28] As explored in Gabriel Haslip-Viera, "The Politics of Taíno Revivalism: The Insignificance of Amerinidan mtDNA in the Population of Puerto Ricans. A comment on recent research," CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, vol. 18 no. 1 (2006).
[29] Torres and Fuller, 70.
[30] Ibid., 49.
[31] Ibid., 50.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 67.
[34] Neeganagwedgin, 383

survival, but rather to continue challenging and disputing historical materials that have written Jamaica Taíno's out of existence entirely. The remainder of this paper will explore the ways in which shifting paradigms on indigenous extinction have come to be recognized on the national level and what challenges persist in reconstructing Taíno histories.

In examining these conflicting discourses, it appears that recent work undertaken by scholars to revisit widely understood notions of Taíno disappearance is occurring alongside national initiatives to reclaim indigenous heritage in Jamaica. For instance, in 2006, the Jamaican National Heritage Trust marked May 5th as "Taíno Day," aimed at raising public recognition and appreciation for the island's original inhabitants.[35] The day is commemorated with exhibitions of historical artifacts and public lectures at the Institute of Jamaica.[36] While this celebration may ultimately reflect the Jamaican state's enduring recognition of Taíno heritage simply as a relic of the pre-colonial past, this national commemoration arguably marks a turning point for state actors to begin engaging in Taíno revival initiatives. This is further exemplified in the 2019 enstooling of a Taíno chief in Jamaica after over five hundred years.[37]

According to The Gleaner, Robert Pairman, an advocate for the preservation of Taíno heritage in Jamaica, was named the *cacique*[38] of a local Taíno tribe in which recovered symbolic gifts from the Institute of Jamaica were offered in celebration. The article detailing the event also cites newfound DNA testing as a significant source of validation for Taíno communities who have affirmed their indigenous ancestry despite centuries of denial. There have also been recent efforts by the National Commission on Reparations calling for the British to return stolen Taíno cultural artifacts to Jamaica.[39] Additionally, the 8th Annual International Maroon Council held by the Charles Town Maroon Council in 2016 emphasizes the need to recognize centuries of indigenous survival in the Caribbean as an organizational goal. The event pamphlet stresses the importance of learning Jamaican Taíno histories and perspectives in order reimagine "how we Jamaicans see ourselves and claim identity." [40]

Despite these historic advances, there remains substantial factors hindering research into Taíno histories that could arguably further progress ongoing revival efforts. Atkinson cites a lack of resources for investigation and long-term research as a major challenge faced by archaeologists in Jamaica.[41]

---

35 "Jamaica Celebrates Taíno Day." The Gleaner, May 5, 2011. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110505/newss5.html.
36 Ibid.
37 Williams, Paul H. "Jamaica Gets First Taíno Chief in over 500 Years." The Gleaner, June 19, 2019. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20190619/jamaica-gets-first-taino-chief-over-500-years
35 "Jamaica Celebrates Taíno Day." The Gleaner, May 5, 2011. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110505/newss5.html.
36 Ibid.
37 Williams, Paul H. "Jamaica Gets First Taíno Chief in over 500 Years." The Gleaner, June 19, 2019. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20190619/jamaica-gets-first-taino-chief-over-500-years.
38 A Taiío chief
39 Lewis, Emma. "As Jamaica Seeks the Return of Taíno Artefacts from Britain, Relics at Home May Not Be Safe · Global Voices." Global Voices, September 2, 2019.
40 Charles Town Maroon Council. "Peace & Dignity Journey 2016." 8th Annual Maroon Conference:Towards a Borderless Indigenous Community, (2016): 11.
41 Atkinson, 7.

More significantly, however, remains the challenge of preserving indigenous artifacts and historical sites. Real estate and infrastructural development threaten the remnants of Taíno civilizations left below the ground.[42] The mistreatment of these materials by institutional bodies and the neglect of calls for controlled development make uncovering lost histories all the more difficult.

Through an examination of the literature on this matter, it appears that historical efforts to erase Taino existence from post-conquest Jamaica have come under serious scrutiny in recent years. I have argued that discourses of creolization and notions of the "indigenization" of African Maroons do not provide constructive frameworks for which surviving Jamaican Taíno communities can investigate and validate claims to indigenous ancestry. While there persist individual attitudes that the possibility of indigenous survival is simply based in "sentimental declarations" and false claims to an extinct heritage, certain actors in Jamaica are shifting towards an understanding of the need for Taíno cultural revival and formalized recognition of their survival. This calls upon the question of power; who is responsible for the resurgence of Taíno histories in Jamaica? In recent years there have been efforts to challenge colonial myths undertaken by scholars and Taíno activists, however, what does actual revival and recognition look like in the Jamaican context? Questions may arise in the near future regarding the role of the state in determining the validity of Taíno self-identification, and so the challenge of ensuring state actors do not resort to the use of colonial-era racialized ascriptions of "legitimate" indigenous heritage is critical. Taíno community leaders must arguably be at the forefront of conversations on formal recognition under the state. Enduring colonial narratives must continue to be challenged and criticized in Jamaican national discourse in order to advance projects of indigenous revival.

[42] Ibid., 8.
[43] Thwaites, Daniel. "Wackos Are Not Extinct." The Gleaner, July 27, 2014.

Works Cited

Allen, Carolyn. "Creole Then And Now: The Problem Of Definition." *Caribbean Quarterly* 44, no. 1/2 (1998): 33-49.

Atkinson, Lesley-Gail, ed. *The Earliest Inhabitants: the Dynamics of the Jamaican Taíno*. Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2006.

Benn Torres, Jada and Harcourt Fuller, "Investigating the 'Taíno' Ancestry of the Jamaican Maroons: A New Genetic (DNA), Historical and Multidisciplinary Analysis and Case Study of the Accompong Town Marroons." *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 43, no.1 (2018): 47-78.

Charles Town Maroon Council. "Peace & Dignity Journey 2016." 8th *Annual Maroon Conference: Towards a Borderless Indigenous Community,* 2016.

Delle, James A. "The Material and Cognitive Dimensions of Creolization in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica." *Historical Archaeology* 34, no. 3 (2000): 56-72.

Duany, Jorge. "Making Indians out of Blacks: The Revitalization of Taíno Identity in Contemporary Puerto Rico," in Gabriel Haslip-Vera, *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspective on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics* (2008): 261-280

Jackson, Shona N. *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean. University of Minnesota Press*, 2012.

"Jamaica Celebrates Taíno Day." The Gleaner, May 5, 2011. http://jamaicagleaner.com/gleaner/20110505/news/news5.html.

Kopytoff, Barbara. "The Development of Jamaican Maroon Ethnicity." *Caribbean Quarterly* 22, no. 2/3 (1976): 33-50.

Lewis, Emma. "As Jamaica Seeks the Return of Taíno Artefacts from Britain, Relics at Home May Not Be Safe · Global Voices." Global Voices, September 2, 2019.

Neegangagwedgin, Erica. "Rooted in the Land: Taíno identity, oral history and stories of reclamation in contemporary contexts." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 11, no. 4 (2015): 376-388

Simms, Gaama Gloria. "Maroon Indigenous Women Circle, Jamaica: Historical Recurrences from Indigenous Women's Perspectives." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 244-247.

Thwaites, Daniel. "Wackos Are Not Extinct." The Gleaner, July 27, 2014. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20140727/cleisure/cleisure4.html.

Williams, Paul H. "Jamaica Gets First Taíno Chief in over 500 Years." The Gleaner, June 19, 2019. http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20190619/jamaica-gets-first-taino-chief-over-500-years.

Wilson, Kathleen. "The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound." *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series*, 66, no. 1 (2009): 45-86.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Jonkonnu in Jamaica." *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970)

Wynter, Sylvia. “Jonkonnu in Jamaica.” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970)