

# MYTH: Columbus met Arawaks in the northern Caribbean

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*Generations of school children in the Anglophone Caribbean have been taught that the native peoples encountered by Christopher Columbus in Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and the Bahamas were Arawaks (Black 1983; Dookhan 2006; Ashdown and Humphreys 1988). However, archaeological and linguistic data indicate that the Amerindians who extensively settled in the northern Caribbean at the time of Spanish contact were very different from the peoples of South America who we today call Arawaks.*

It is impossible to write about the past without assigning names to the peoples about whom we write. Over the years a variety of names have been used to designate the pre-colonial peoples of the Americas. Unfortunately, the names that were selected have in some cases led to confusion regarding cultural heritage and ethnic identity. The name Arawak is one that has resulted in such significant confusion that archaeologists working in the region have now abandoned the name as it specifically relates to the Caribbean.

## Origins of the word “Arawak”

In order to recognize the substantial cultural differences between Arawak societies in mainland South America and the peoples of the northern Caribbean at the time of Spanish contact, Caribbean archaeologists now use the name Taínos in reference to the latter. This term relates specifically to natives who lived in the northern Caribbean from A.D. 1200 to 1500 and who had evolved from the Ostionoids. Although the names Taínos and Arawaks have been used

interchangeably (Gilmore et al. 2003), from all accounts they were two distinct ethnic/cultural groups: the former located in northeastern South America, while the latter occupied much of the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas at the time of Columbus. In fact, neither Columbus nor any of his contemporaries came across the word Arawak (Olsen 1974). Essentially, the word “Arawak” does not appear in the literature until the exploration of the Guianas began in the late 1500s, almost a century after the arrival of Columbus in the New World.

Sir Walter Raleigh, the famed English explorer, identified the Arawaks and at least four Indian groups when he visited Trinidad in 1595. Centuries later, in 1894, Juan Lopez de Velasco noted the presence of people who called themselves Arawaks on the Guiana coast, and commented that a group of them had “intruded” Trinidad. The Arawaks of Trinidad have long ceased to be an identifiable ethnic group, although the Santa Rosa Carib Community based in Arima, Trinidad, is purportedly the product of the mixing of several native groups, including the Arawaks. However, there are numerous Arawak villages in Guyana, Suriname, northern Brasil and French Guiana to this day (Carlin and Arends 2002; Vandenbel 2007).

In the past, some scholars used certain linguistic similarities between these native peoples of South America and those encountered by Columbus in the northern Caribbean. In 1871, for instance, Daniel Brinton, after studying a few word lists that survived in the Greater Antilles with the modern language of the Arawaks in the Guianas, came to the conclusion that the Amerindians in the Greater Antilles also conversed in the language spoken by the Arawaks. He applied the name “Island-Arawak” to the Antilleans in order to distinguish them from the peoples of the mainland. Unfortunately, this distinction was lost and the peoples of the Caribbean came to be known simply as “Arawaks” (Carlin and Arends 2002; Vandenbel 2007).

Subsequent authors such as Sven Lovén (1935) have demonstrated a preference for “Insular Arawak”, or the “Island-Arawak” (Reid 1994).

### **Linguistic and Cultural Differences between the Taínos and the Arawaks**

The Taínos, who inhabited the northern Caribbean at contact, spoke a different language and were culturally distinct from the South American Arawaks. At a more general level, the languages of the Taínos and the Arawaks share enough similarities to be classified as members of the Arawakan language family (Keegan 1992). However, this is not surprising as the languages of the Taínos, Arawaks and Island-Caribs all originated from the Arawak family of languages which extended from the Upper Amazon Basin to Venezuela, the Guianas and the West Indies (Figure 3.2). But the differences between these languages were substantial and whatever similarities that existed could be compared to those between English and Dutch within the Indo-European family of languages (Olsen 1974; Reid 1994).....

Linguistics aside, the cultural differences between the Taínos and the Arawaks clearly distinguished one group from the other. Although the Taínos and the Arawaks both worshipped ancestral spirits (*zemis*) and used griddles to bake cassava bread, archaeological and ethnohistorical data indicate that the latter had a simpler culture. While the Arawaks slashed and burned the forest to make temporary farms, the Taínos of the Caribbean, especially those in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, practiced a sophisticated *conuco* agriculture, based on mounds of earth in more permanent fields. The mounds, three feet high and some nine feet in circumference, were arranged in regular rows. They retarded erosion, improved drainage, and thus permitted more lengthy in-ground storage of root crops (Rouse 1992). In contrast to the

Arawaks of South America, the Taínos built much larger, permanent villages. The latter were characterized by a more elaborate socio-political organization, with district and even regional chiefdoms as well as ballparks and plazas (Wilson 1990).

### **Controversy**

However, the use of the word Taíno has not been without controversy. Taíno means “good” or “noble” and several of its members allegedly used that word to Columbus’s crew to indicate that they were not Island-Caribs. This was documented in Peter Martyr D’Anghera’s (1587) account of an incident during Columbus’s second voyage while Melchior Maldonado was exploring the coast of Hispaniola:

“In the course of their exploration of this country, the Spaniards perceived in the distance a large house, which they approached, persuaded that it was the retreat of Guaccanarillo. They were met by a man with a wrinkled forehead and frowning brows, who was escorted by about a hundred warriors armed with bows and arrows, pointed lances and clubs. He advanced menacingly towards them, “Taíno”, the natives cried, that is say good men, not cannibals. In response to our amicable signs, they dropped their arms and modified their ferocious attitude... (English translation in D’Anghera 1912 1:81: Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:60).” (Hulme 1993)

The validity of this account has been questioned (Hulme 1993), given that Peter Martyr was not an actual eyewitness to the event nor did he ever set foot in the New World. Moreover, naming a culture by a greeting is not logical at all and is tantamount to saying “Hello Culture,” “Good Day Culture,” “Bienvenidos Culture” and so on.

It has been argued that the word Taíno was first used, within an academic context, by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque in 1836. Rafinesque’s Mesoamerican and Caribbean studies were centred on linguistic data, which he extracted from printed sources, mostly those of travelers. As an alternative to Island-Arawak (Hulme 1993), he used the term Taíno in specific

reference to the language spoken anciently in Haiti. Over time, others (Wilson 1990; Rouse 1992) applied the word Taíno to the ethnicity of natives in the northern Caribbean at contact. The word *nitayno*, which bears a striking similarity to Taíno, has cropped up in the Spanish literature as referring to Taíno nobility (Rouse 1992). According to his diary entry for December 23, 1492, Columbus had the following encounters with the natives of Hispaniola:

All of the Indians returned with the Christians to the village, which he affirms to be the largest and best arranged with streets than any other passed through and found up to that time...Until then the Admiral had not been able to understand whether the cacique meant King or governor. They also use another name for an important person, whom they call *nitayno*. He does not know if they say it for noble or governor or judge...(Columbus 1989: 271) (Hulme 1993).

Rather than being used as an ethnic label, *nitayno* referred to Taíno ruling class (Rouse 1992), which was probably a reflection of the natives being viewed through the prism of the Spanish class structure. It has even been proposed that that the term “Taíno” should be altogether scrapped as an ethnic classification (Whitehead 1995) as it gives the erroneous impression that the northern Caribbean was inhabited by a single, largely homogeneous culture (Keegan 1996a). One school of thought argues that the islanders whom Columbus encountered on his first voyage did not have a self-designation or if they did Columbus did not make mention of it; he simply called them *indios* (Whitehead 1995), as the Admiral mistakenly thought that he had “discovered” natives of islands off the coast of Asia.....

Despite the controversy surrounding the word Taíno, it is generally accepted that there were significant linguistic and cultural differences between the contact-period natives of the northern Caribbean on the one hand and the Arawaks of South America on the other hand. On this basis, it would be grossly inaccurate to refer to the inhabitants of the Greater Antilles and the

Bahamas at the time of Spanish contact as Arawaks. The jury is still out on whether the word Taínos is entirely accurate as it is presently used. Suffice it to say that Caribbean archaeologists will continue to use it until they find a better alternative.