

Historical Background

MEMORY OF FIRE

GENESIS



EDUARDO GALEANO

"Triumphant... sure to search the sensibility of English-

Eduardo Galeano

MEMORY OF FIRE

I. GENESIS

Part One of a Trilogy

Translated
by Cedric Belfrage



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Preface

I was a wretched history student. History classes were like visits to the waxworks or the Region of the Dead. The past was lifeless, hollow, dumb. They taught us about the past so that we should resign ourselves with drained consciences to the present: not to make history, which was already made, but to accept it. Poor History had stopped breathing: betrayed in academic texts, lied about in classrooms, drowned in dates, they had imprisoned her in museums and buried her, with floral wreaths, beneath statuary bronze and monumental marble.

Perhaps *Memory of Fire* can help give her back breath, liberty, and the word.

Through the centuries, Latin America has been despoiled of gold and silver, nitrates and rubber, copper and oil: its memory has also been usurped. From the outset it has been condemned to amnesia by those who have prevented it from being. Official Latin American history boils down to a military parade of bigwigs in uniforms fresh from the dry-cleaners. I am not a historian. I am a writer who would like to contribute to the rescue of the kidnapped memory of all America, but above all of Latin America, that despised and beloved land: I would like to talk to her, share her secrets, ask her of what difficult clays she was born, from what acts of love and violation she comes.

I don't know to what literary form this voice of voices belongs. *Memory of Fire* is not an anthology, clearly not; but I don't know if it is a novel or essay or epic poem or testament or chronicle or . . . Deciding robs me of no sleep. I do not believe in the frontiers that, according to literature's customs officers, separate the forms.

I did not want to write an objective work—neither wanted to nor could. There is nothing neutral about this historical narration. Unable to distance myself, I take sides: I confess it and am not sorry. However, each fragment of this huge mosaic is based on a solid documentary foundation. What is told here has happened, although I tell it in my style and manner.

* The Creation

The woman and the man dreamed that God was dreaming about them.

God was singing and clacking his maracas as he dreamed his dream in a cloud of tobacco smoke, feeling happy but shaken by doubt and mystery.

The (Makiritare) Indians know that if God dreams about eating, he gives fertility and food. If God dreams about life, he is born and gives birth.

In their dream about God's dream, the woman and the man were inside a great shining egg, singing and dancing and kicking up a fuss because they were crazy to be born. In God's dream happiness was stronger than doubt and mystery. So dreaming, God created them with a song:

"I break this egg and the woman is born and the man is born. And together they will live and die. But they will be born again. They will be born and die again and be born again. They will never stop being born, because death is a lie."

Memory of Fire (51)*



Time

For the Maya, time was born and had a name when the sky didn't exist and the earth had not yet awakened.

The days set out from the east and started walking.

The first day produced from its entrails the sky and the earth.

The second day made the stairway for the rain to run down.

The cycles of the sea and the land, and the multitude of things, were the work of the third day.

The fourth day willed the earth and the sky to tilt so that they could meet.

The fifth day decided that everyone had to work.

The first light emanated from the sixth day.

In places where there was nothing, the seventh day put soil; the eighth plunged its hands and feet in the soil.

* This number indicates the source consulted by the author, as listed at the end of the book.

"I'm miraculous," said Gluskabe. "Nobody made me."

God stood beside him and reached out his hand toward the universe. "Look at my work," he challenged. "If you're miraculous, show me things you have invented."

"I can make wind, if you like." And Gluskabe blew at the top of his lungs.

The wind was born and immediately died.

"I can make wind," Gluskabe admitted shamefacedly, "but I can't make it stay."

Then God blew, so powerfully that Gluskabe fell down and lost all his hair.

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The Rain

In the region of the great northern lakes, a little girl suddenly discovered she was alive. The wonders of the world opened her eyes and she took off at random.

Following the trail of the Menominee nation's hunters and woodcutters, she came to a big log cabin. There lived ten brothers, birds of the thunder, who offered her shelter and food.

One bad morning, when she was fetching water from the creek, a hairy snake caught her and carried her into the depths of a rocky mountain. The snakes were about to eat her up when the little girl sang.

From far away, the thunder birds heard the call. They attacked the rocky mountain with lightning, rescued the prisoner, and killed the snakes.

The thunder birds left the little girl in the fork of a tree.

"You'll live here," they told her. "We'll come every time you sing."

Whenever the little green tree frog sings from his tree, the thunderclaps gather and it rains upon the world.

(113)



The Rainbow

The forest dwarfs had caught Yobuënahuaboshka in an ambush and cut off his head.

The head bumped its way back to the land of the Cashinahuas.

Although it had learned to jump and balance gracefully, nobody wanted a head without a body.

"Mother, brothers, countrymen," it said with a sigh, "Why do you reject me? Why are you ashamed of me?"

To stop the complaints and get rid of the head, the mother proposed that it should change itself into something, but the head refused to change into what already existed. The head thought, dreamed, figured. The moon didn't exist. The rainbow didn't exist.

It asked for seven little balls of thread of all colors.

It took aim and threw the balls into the sky one after the other. The balls got hooked up beyond the clouds; the threads gently unraveled toward the earth.

Before going up, the head warned: "Whoever doesn't recognize me will be punished. When you see me up there, say: 'There's the high and handsome Yobuënahuaboshka!'"

Then it plaited the seven hanging threads together and climbed up the rope to the sky.

That night a white gash appeared for the first time among the stars. A girl raised her eyes and asked in astonishment: "What's that?"

Immediately a red parrot swooped upon her, gave a sudden twirl, and pricked her between the legs with his sharp-pointed tail. The girl bled. From that moment, women bleed when the moon says so.

Next morning the cord of seven colors blazed in the sky.

A man pointed his finger at it. "Look, look! How extraordinary!" He said it and fell down.

And that was the first time that someone died.

(59)



✧ The Frog

From a cave in Haiti came the first Taíno Indians.

The sun had no mercy on them. Suddenly, without warning, he would kidnap and transform them. He turned the one who mounted guard by night into a stone; of the fisherman he made trees, and the one who went out for herbs he caught on the road and turned into a bird that sings in the morning.

One of the men fled from the sun. When he took off, he took all the women with him.

There is no laughter in the song of the little frogs in the Caribbean islands. They are the Taíno children of those days. They say, "Toa, toa," which is their way of calling to their mothers.

(126 and 168)



✧ The Bat

When time was yet in the cradle, there was no uglier creature in the world than the bat.

The bat went up to heaven to look for God. He didn't say, "I'm bored with being hideous. Give me colored feathers." No. He said, "Please give me feathers, I'm dying of cold."

But God had not a single feather left over.

"Each bird will give you a feather," he decided.

Thus the bat got the white feather of the dove and the green one of the parrot, the iridescent one of the hummingbird, the pink one of the flamingo, the red of the cardinal's tuft and the blue of the kingfisher's back, the clayey one of the eagle's wing, and the sun feather that burns in the breast of the toucan.

The bat, luxuriant with colors and softness, moved between earth and clouds. Wherever he went, the air became pleasant and the birds dumb with admiration. According to the Zapotec peoples, the rainbow was born of the echo of his flight.

Vanity puffed out his chest. He acquired a disdainful look and made insulting remarks.

The birds called a meeting. Together they flew up to God.

"The bat makes fun of us," they complained. "And what's more, we feel cold for lack of the feathers he took."

Next day, when the bat shook his feathers in full flight, he suddenly became naked. A rain of feathers fell to earth.

He is still searching for them. Blind and ugly, enemy of the light, he lives hidden in caves. He goes out in pursuit of the lost feathers after night has fallen and flies very fast, never stopping because it shames him to be seen.

(92)



✧ Mosquitos

There were many dead in the Nooktas village. In each dead body there was a hole through which blood had been stolen.

The murderer, a child who was already killing before he learned to walk, received his sentence roaring with laughter. They pierced him with lances and he laughingly picked them out of his body like thorns.

"I'll teach you to kill me," said the child.

He suggested to his executioners that they should light a big bonfire and throw him into it.

His ashes scattered through the air, anxious to do harm, and thus the first mosquitos started to fly.

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Honey

Honey was in flight from his two sisters-in-law. They had thrown him out of the hammock several times.

They came after him night and day. They saw him and it made their mouths water. Only in dreams did they succeed in touching him, licking him, eating him.

Their spite kept growing. One morning when the sisters-in-law were bathing, they came upon Honey on the riverbank. They ran and splashed him. Once wet, Honey dissolved.

★ 1492: *The Ocean Sea*

The Sun Route to the Indies

The breezes are sweet and soft, as in spring in Seville, and the sea is like a Guadalquivir river, but the swell no sooner rises than they get seasick and vomit, jammed into their fo'c'sles, the men who in three patched-up little ships cleave the unknown sea, the sea without a frame. Men, little drops in the wind. And if the sea doesn't love them? Night falls on the caravels. Whither will the wind toss them? A dorado, chasing a flying fish, jumps on board and the panic grows. The crew don't appreciate the savory aroma of the slightly choppy sea, nor do they listen to the din of the sea gulls and gannets that come from the west. That horizon: does the abyss begin there? Does the sea end?

Feverish eyes of mariners weatherbeaten in a thousand voyages, burning eyes of jailbirds yanked from Andalusian prisons and embarked by force: these eyes see no prophetic reflections of gold and silver in the foam of the waves, nor in the country and river birds that keep flying over the ships, nor in the green rushes and branches thick with shells that drift in the sargassos. The bottom of the abyss—is that where hell starts to burn? Into what kind of jaws will the trade winds hurl these little men? They gaze at the stars, seeking God, but the sky is as inscrutable as this never-navigated sea. They hear its roar, mother sea, the hoarse voice answering the wind with phrases of eternal condemnation, mysterious drums resounding in the depths. They cross themselves and want to pray and stammer: "Tonight we'll fall off the world, tonight we'll fall off the world."

(52)

★ 1492: *Guanahani*

Columbus

He falls on his knees, weeps, kisses the earth. He steps forward, staggering because for more than a month he has hardly slept, and beheads some shrubs with his sword.

Then he raises the flag. On one knee, eyes lifted to heaven,

he pronounces three times the names of Isabella and Ferdinand. Beside him the scribe Rodrigo de Escobedo, a man slow of pen, draws up the document.

From today, everything belongs to those remote monarchs: the coral sea, the beaches, the rocks all green with moss, the woods, the parrots, and these laurel-skinned people who don't yet know about clothes, sin, or money and gaze dazedly at the scene.

Luis de Torres translates Christopher Columbus's questions into Hebrew: "Do you know the kingdom of the Great Khan? Where does the gold you have in your noses and ears come from?"

The naked men stare at him with open mouths, and the interpreter tries out his small stock of Chaldean: "Gold? Temples? Palaces? King of kings? Gold?"

Then he tries his Arabic, the little he knows of it: "Japan? China? Gold?"

The interpreter apologizes to Columbus in the language of Castile. Columbus curses in Genovese and throws to the ground his credentials, written in Latin and addressed to the Great Khan. The naked men watch the anger of the intruder with red hair and coarse skin, who wears a velvet cape and very shiny clothes.

Soon the word will run through the islands:

"Come and see the men who arrived from the sky! Bring them food and drink!"

(52)

1493: *Barcelona*

Day of Glory

The heralds announce him with their trumpets. The bells peal and the drums beat out festive rhythms. The admiral, newly returned from the Indies, mounts the stone steps and advances on the crimson carpet amid the silken dazzle of the applauding royal court. The man who has made the saints' and sages' prophecies come true reaches the platform, kneels, and kisses the hands of the queen and the king.

From the rear come the trophies: gleaming on trays, the bits of gold that Columbus had exchanged for little mirrors and red caps in the remote gardens newly burst from the sea. On branches and dead leaves are paraded the skins of lizards and snakes; and behind them, trembling and weeping, enter the beings never be-

He staggers up on deck. Mouth open, he takes a deep breath of sea breeze. In a loud voice, as if announcing an eternal truth, he says, "These Indian woman are all whores."

(181)

1495: *Salamanca*

The First Word from America

Elio Antonio de Nebrija, language scholar, publishes here his "Spanish-Latin Vocabulary." The dictionary includes the first Americanism of the Castilian language:

Canoa: Boat made from a single timber.

The new word comes from the Antilles.

These boats without sails, made of the trunk of a ceiba tree, welcomed Christopher Columbus. Out from the islands, paddling canoes, came the men with long black hair and bodies tattooed with vermilion symbols. They approached the caravels, offered fresh water, and exchanged gold for the kind of little tin bells that sell for a copper in Castile.

(52 and 154)

★ 1495: *La Isabela*

Caonabó

Detached, aloof, the prisoner sits at the entrance of Christopher Columbus's house. He has iron shackles on his ankles, and handcuffs trap his wrists.

Caonabó was the one who burned to ashes the Navidad fort that the admiral had built when he discovered this island of Haiti. He burned the fort and killed its occupants. And not only them: In these two long years he has castigated with arrows any Spaniards he came across in Cibao, his mountain territory, for their hunting of gold and people.

Alonso de Ojeda, veteran of the wars against the Moors, paid him a visit on the pretext of peace. He invited him to mount his horse, and put on him these handcuffs of burnished metal that tie

his hands, saying that they were jewels worn by the monarchs of Castile in their balls and festivities.

Now Chief Caonabó spends the days sitting beside the door, his eyes fixed on the tongue of light that invades the earth floor at dawn and slowly retreats in the evening. He doesn't move an eyelash when Columbus comes around. On the other hand, when Ojeda appears, he manages to stand up and salute with a bow the only man who has defeated him.

(103 and 158)

1496: *La Concepción*

Sacrilege

Bartholomew Columbus, Christopher's brother and lieutenant, attends an incineration of human flesh.

Six men play the leads in the grand opening of Haiti's incinerator. The smoke makes everyone cough. The six are burning as a punishment and as a lesson: They have buried the images of Christ and the Virgin that Fray Ramón Pané left with them for protection and consolation. Fray Ramón taught them to pray on their knees, to say the Ave Maria and Paternoster and to invoke the name of Jesus in the face of temptation, injury, and death.

No one has asked them why they buried the images. They were hoping that the new gods would fertilize their fields of corn, cassava, boniato, and beans.

The fire adds warmth to the humid, sticky heat that foreshadows heavy rain.

(103)

1498: *Santo Domingo*

Earthly Paradise

In the evening, beside the Ozama River, Christopher Columbus writes a letter. His body creaks with rheumatism, but his heart jumps for joy. The discoverer explains to Their Catholic Majesties *that which is plainly evident*: Earthly Paradise is on the nipple of a woman's breast.

He realized it two months ago, when his caravels entered the

1511: Yara

Hatuey

In these islands, ~~in these Calvaries~~, those who choose death by hanging themselves or drinking poison along with their children are many. The invaders cannot avoid this vengeance, but know how to explain it: the Indians, *so savage that they think everything is in common*, as Oviedo will say, *are people by nature idle and vicious, doing little work. For a pastime many killed themselves with venom so as not to work, and others hanged themselves with their own hands.*

Hatuey, Indian chief of the Guahaba region, has not killed himself. He fled with his people from Haiti in a canoe and took refuge in the caves and mountains of eastern Cuba.

There he pointed to a basketful of gold and said: "This is the god of the Christians. For him they pursue us. For him our fathers and our brothers have died. Let us dance for him. If our dance pleases him, this god will order them not to mistreat us."

They catch him three months later.

They tie him to a stake.

Before lighting the fire that will reduce him to charcoal and ash, the priest promises him glory and eternal rest if he agrees to be baptized. Hatuey asks:

"Are there Christians in that heaven?"

"Yes."

Hatuey chooses hell, and the firewood begins to crackle.

(102, 103, and 166)

1511: Santo Domingo

The First Protest

In the log-walled, palm-roofed church, Antonio de Montesinos, Dominican friar, hurls thunder from the pulpit. He denounces the extermination:

"By what right and by what justice do you hold the Indians in such cruel and horrible bondage? Aren't they dying, or better said, aren't you killing them, to get gold every day? Are you not

obliged to love them as yourselves? Don't you understand this, don't you feel it?"

Then Montesinos, head high, makes his way through the astounded multitude.

A murmur of fury swells up. They didn't bargain for this, these peasants from Estremadura and shepherds from Andalusia who have repudiated their names and histories and, with rusty arquebuses slung over their shoulders, left at random in search of the mountains of gold and the nude princesses on this side of the ocean. A Mass of pardon and consolation was what was needed by these adventurers bought with promises on the steps of Seville Cathedral, these flea-bitten captains, veterans of no battle, and condemned prisoners who had to choose between America and jail or gallows.

"We'll denounce you to King Ferdinand! You'll be deported!"

One bewildered man remains silent. He came to these lands nine years ago. Owner of Indians, gold mines, and plantations, he has made a small fortune. His name is Bartolomé de las Casas, and he will soon be the first priest ordained in the New World.

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1513: Cuareca

Leoncico

Their muscles almost burst through the skin. Their yellow eyes never stop flashing. They pant. They snap their jaws and bite holes in the air. No chain can hold them when they get the command to attack.

Tonight, by order of Captain Balboa, the dogs will sink their teeth into the naked flesh of fifty Indians of Panama. They will disembowel and devour fifty who were guilty of the abominable sin of sodomy, *who only lacked tits and wombs to be women*. The spectacle will take place in this mountain clearing, among the trees that the storm uprooted a few days ago. By torchlight the soldiers quarrel and jockey for the best places.

Vasco Núñez de Balboa chairs the ceremony. His dog Leoncico heads up God's avengers. Leoncico, son of Becerrillo, has a body crisscrossed with scars. He is a past master of capturings and

DANGEROUS MEMORIES



Invasion and Resistance Since 1492

Men of the Good

The following excerpts from an article by Jose Barreiros describe in some detail the culture that had enjoyed a long existence in the area where Columbus landed. Although the cultural patterns of the "new world" vary tremendously, this one, as the first to feel the effects of the conquest, is a key example of the values, lifestyles, and community organization practiced by many groups throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The word Taino meant "men of the good," and from most indications the Tainos were good. Coupled to the lush and hospitable islands over a millennium and a half, the indigenous people of "La Taina" developed a culture where the human personality was gentle. Among the Taino at the time of contact, by all accounts, generosity and kindness were dominant values. Among the Taino peoples, as with most indigenous lifeways, the physical culture was geared toward a sustainable interaction with the natural surroundings. The Taino's culture has been designated as "primitive" by Western scholarship, yet it prescribed a lifeway that strove to feed all the people, and a spirituality that respected, in ceremony, most of their main animal and food sources, as well as the natural forces like climate, season, and weather. The Taino lived respectfully in a bountiful place and so their nature was bountiful.

The naked people Columbus first sighted lived in an island world of rainforests and tropical weather, and adventure and fishing legends at sea. Theirs was a land of generous abundance by global terms. They could build a dwelling from a single tree (the Royal Palm) and from several others (gommier, ceiba), a canoe that could carry more than one hundred people.

... The Tainos lived in the shadows of a diverse forest so biologically remarkable as to be almost unimaginable to us, and, indeed, the biological transformation of their world was so complete in the intervening centuries that we may never again know how the land or the life of the land appeared in detail. What we do know is that their world would appear to us, as it did to the Spanish of the fifteenth century, as a tropical paradise. It was not heaven on earth, but it was one of those places that was reasonably close.

The Taino world, for the most part, had some of the appearance that modern imaginations ascribe to the South Pacific islands. The people lived in small, clean villages of neatly appointed thatch dwellings along rivers inland and on the coasts. They were a handsome people who had no need of clothing for warmth. They liked to

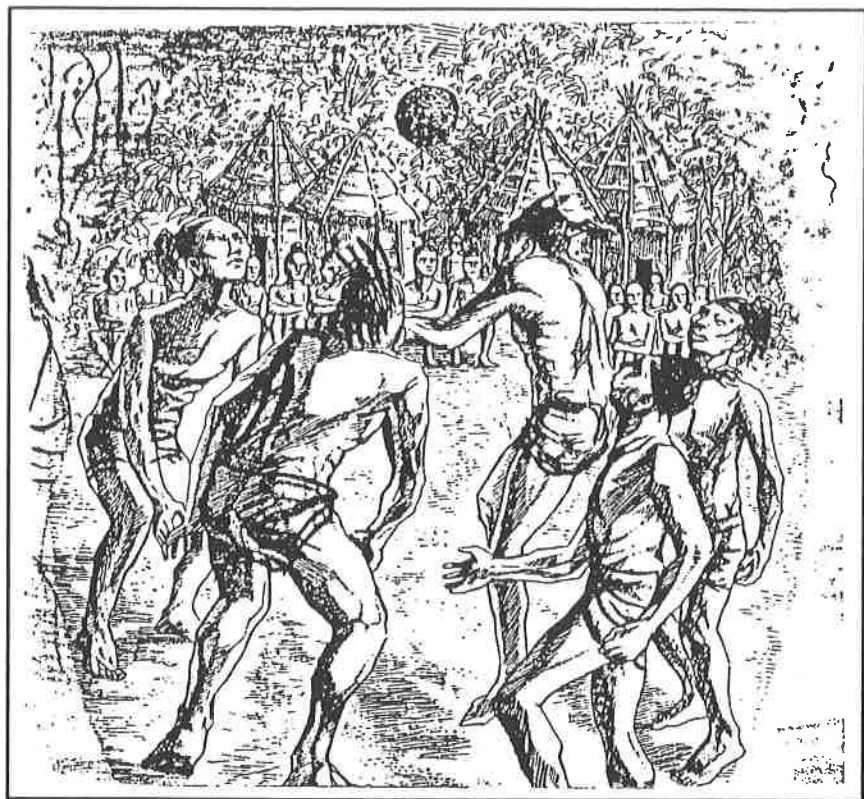
bathe often, which prompted a Spanish royal law forbidding the practice, "for we are informed it does them much harm," wrote Queen Isabella.

The Taino were a sea-going people, and took pride in their courage on the high ocean as well as their skill in finding their way around their world. They visited one another constantly. Columbus was often astonished at finding lone Indian fishermen sailing in the open ocean as he made his way among the islands. Once, a canoe of Taino men followed him from island to island until one of their relatives, held captive on Columbus's flagship, jumped over the side to be spirited away.

Among Tainos, the women and some of the men harvested corn, nuts, cassava, and other roots. They appear to have practiced a rotation method in their agriculture. As in the practice of many other American indigenous ecosystemic peoples, the first shoots of important crops, such as the yucca, beans and corn, were appreciated in ceremony, and there are stories about their origins. Boys hunted fowl from flocks that "darkened the sun," according to Columbus, and the men forded rivers and braved ocean to hunt and fish for the abundant, tree-going jutia, the succulent manati, giant sea turtles and countless species of other fish, turtles and shellfish. Around every bohio [hut], Columbus wrote, there were flocks of tame ducks (yaguasa), which the people roasted and ate.

... The Taino world of 1492 was a thriving place. The Taino islands supported large populations that had existed in an environment of Carib-Taino conflict for, according to archeological evidence, one and a half millennia, although the earliest human fossil in the region is dated at fifteen thousand years. Tainos and Caribs may have visited violence upon one another, and there is little doubt they did not like each other, but there is little evidence to support any thesis that genocidal warfare existed in this world. A Carib war party arrived and attacked, was successful or repulsed, and the Tainos, from all accounts, returned to what they were doing before the attack. These attacks were not followed up by a sustained campaign of attrition. . . .

Early descriptions of Taino life at contact tell of large concentrations, strings of a hundred or more villages of five hundred to one thousand people. These concentrations of people in coastal areas and river deltas were apparently well-fed by a nature-harvesting and agricultural production system whose primary value was that all of the people had the right to eat. Everyone in the society had a food or other goods producing task, even the highly esteemed *caciques* and *behiques* (medicine people), who were often seen to plant, hunt, and fish along with their people. In the Taino culture, as with most natural world cultures of the Americas, the concept was still fresh in the human memory that the primary bounties of the earth, particularly those that humans eat, are to be produced in cooperation and shared.



... Like all American indigenous peoples, the Taino had an involved economic life. They could trade throughout the Caribbean and had systems of governance and beliefs that maintained harmony between human and natural environments. The Tainos enjoyed a peaceful way of life that modern anthropologists now call "ecosystemic." In the wake of recent scientific revelations about the cost of high impact technologies upon the natural world, a culture such as the Taino, that could feed several million people without permanently wearing down its surroundings, might command higher respect.

... There was little or no quarrelling observed among the Tainos by the Spaniards. The old *caciques* and their councils of elders were said to be well-behaved, had a deliberate way of speaking and great authority. ... The peoples were organized to the gardens (*conucos*) or to the sea and the hunt. They had ball games played in *bateyes*, or courtyards, in front of the *cacique's* house. They held both ceremonial and social dances, called *areitos*, during which their creation stories and other cosmologies were recited. Among the few Taino-Arawak customs that have survived the longest, the predominant ideas are that ancestors should be properly greeted by the living humans at prescribed times and that natural forces and the spirits behind each group of food and medicinal plants and useful animals should be appreciated in ceremony.

As can be seen throughout the Americas, American indigenous peoples and their systems of life have been denigrated and misperceived. Most persistent of European ethnocentrism toward Indians is the concept of "the primitive," always buttressed with the rule of "least advanced" to "most advanced" imposed by the prism of Western Civilization—the more "primitive" a people, the lower the place they are assigned in the scale of "civilization." The anti-nature attitude . . . [inherent in this idea] came over with the Iberians of the time, some of whom even died rather than perform manual labor, particularly tilling of the soil. The production and harvesting of food from sea, land, and forests were esteemed human activities among Tainos. As with other indigenous cultures, the sophistication and sustainability of agricultural and natural harvesting systems was an important value and possibly the most grievous loss caused by the conquest of the Americas.

Jose Barreiro, "A Note on Tainos: Whither Progress?"
*View from the Shore: American Indian Perspectives on the
 Quincentenary, Northeast Indian Quarterly*, 7:3 (Fall, 1990), 66-71

The Devastation of the Indies

One can open any page of the writings of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and find descriptions of horrible atrocities. The following is only a sample.

This large island [Hispaniola] was perhaps the most densely populated place in the world. There must be close to two hundred leagues of land on this island, and the seacoast has been explored for more than ten thousand leagues, and each day more of it is being explored. And all the land so far discovered is a beehive of people; it is as though God had crowded into these lands the great majority of mankind.

And of all the infinite universe of humanity, these people are the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient and faithful to their native masters and to the Spanish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments, neither excitable nor quarrelsome. These people are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world. And because they are so weak and complaisant, they are less able to endure heavy labor and soon die of no matter what malady. The sons of nobles among us, brought up in the enjoyments of life's refinements, are no more delicate than are these Indians, even those among them who are of the lowest rank of laborers. They are also poor people, for they not only possess little but have no desire to possess worldly goods. For this reason they are not arrogant, embittered, or greedy. Their repasts are such that the food of the holy fathers in the desert can scarcely be more parsimonious, scanty, and poor. . . .

Yet into this sheepfold, into this land of meek outcasts there came some Spaniards who immediately behaved like ravening wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days. And Spaniards have behaved in no other way during the past forty years, down to the present time, for they are still acting like ravening beasts, killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before, and to such a degree that this Island of Hispaniola, once so populous (having a population that I estimated to be more than three millions), has now a population of barely two hundred persons.

. . . [On the other islands and the mainland] we can estimate very surely and truthfully that in the forty years that have passed, with the infernal actions of the Chris-

tians, there have been unjustly slain more than twelve million men, women, and children. In truth, I believe without trying to deceive myself that the number of the slain is more like fifteen million. . . .

It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient, so easy to subject, that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts. And I say this from my own knowledge of the acts I witnessed. But I should not say "than beasts" for, thanks be to God, they have treated beasts with some respect; I should say instead like excrement on the public squares.

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, translated by Herma Briffault, 37-41

The Spaniards did not content themselves with what the Indians gave them of their own free will, according to their ability, which was always too little to satisfy enormous appetites, for a Christian eats and consumes in one day an amount of food that would suffice to feed three houses inhabited by ten Indians for one month. And they committed other acts of force and violence and oppression which made the Indians realize that these men had not come from Heaven. . . .

They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. (Because of this, the wars of the Indians against each other are little more than games played by children.) And the Christians, with their horses and swords and spikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of

the devil!" Other infants they put to the sword along with their mothers and anyone else who happened to be nearby. They made some low wide gallows on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen, in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles, then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive. To others they attached straw or wrapped their whole bodies in straw and set them afire. With still others, all those they wanted to capture alive, they cut off their hands and hung them round the victim's neck, saying "Go now, carry the message," meaning, Take the news to the Indians who have fled to the mountains. . . . And because on few and far between occasions, the Indians justifiably killed some Christians, the Spaniards made a rule among themselves that for every Christian slain by the Indians, they would slay a hundred Indians.

Devastation, 43-45

Another thing must be added: from the beginning to the present time the Spaniards have taken no more care to have the Faith of Jesus Christ preached to those nations than they would to have it preached to dogs or other beasts. Instead, they have prohibited the religious from carrying out this intention, and have afflicted them and

persecuted them in many ways, because such preaching would, they deemed, have hindered them from acquiring gold and other wealth they coveted. And today in all the Indies there is no more knowledge of God, whether He be of wood or sky, or earth, and this after one hundred years in the New World. . . .

Devastation, 139

The tyranny exercised by the Spaniards against the Indians in the work of pearl fishing is one of the most cruel that can be imagined. There is no life as infernal and desperate in this century that can be compared with it, although the mining of gold is a dangerous

and burdensome way of life. The pearl fishers dive into the sea at a depth of five fathoms, and do this from sunrise to sunset, and remain for many minutes without breathing, tearing the oysters out of their rocky beds where the pearls are formed. They come to the surface with a netted bag of these oysters where a Spanish torturer is waiting in a canoe or skiff, and if the pearl diver shows signs of wanting to rest, he is showered with blows, his hair is pulled, and he is thrown back into the water, obliged to continue the hard work of tearing out the oysters and bringing them again to the surface. . . .

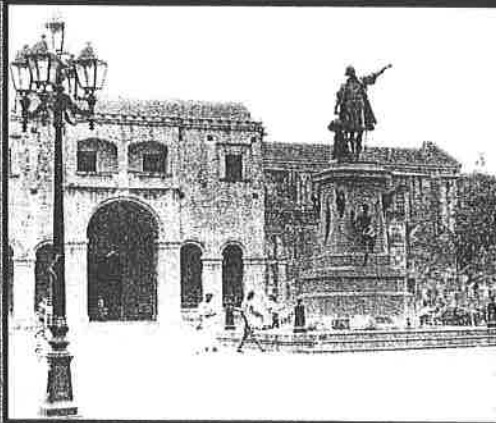
At night the pearl divers are chained so they cannot escape. Often a pearl diver does not return to the surface, for these waters are infested with man-eating sharks of two kinds, both vicious marine animals that can kill, eat, and swallow a whole man. . . .

And it is solely because of the Spaniards' greed for gold that they force the Indians to lead such a life, often a brief life, for it is impossible to continue for long diving into the cold water and holding the breath for minutes at a time, repeating this hour after hour, day after day; the continual cold penetrates them, constricts the chest, and they die spitting blood, or weakened by diarrhea.

Devastation, 109-111



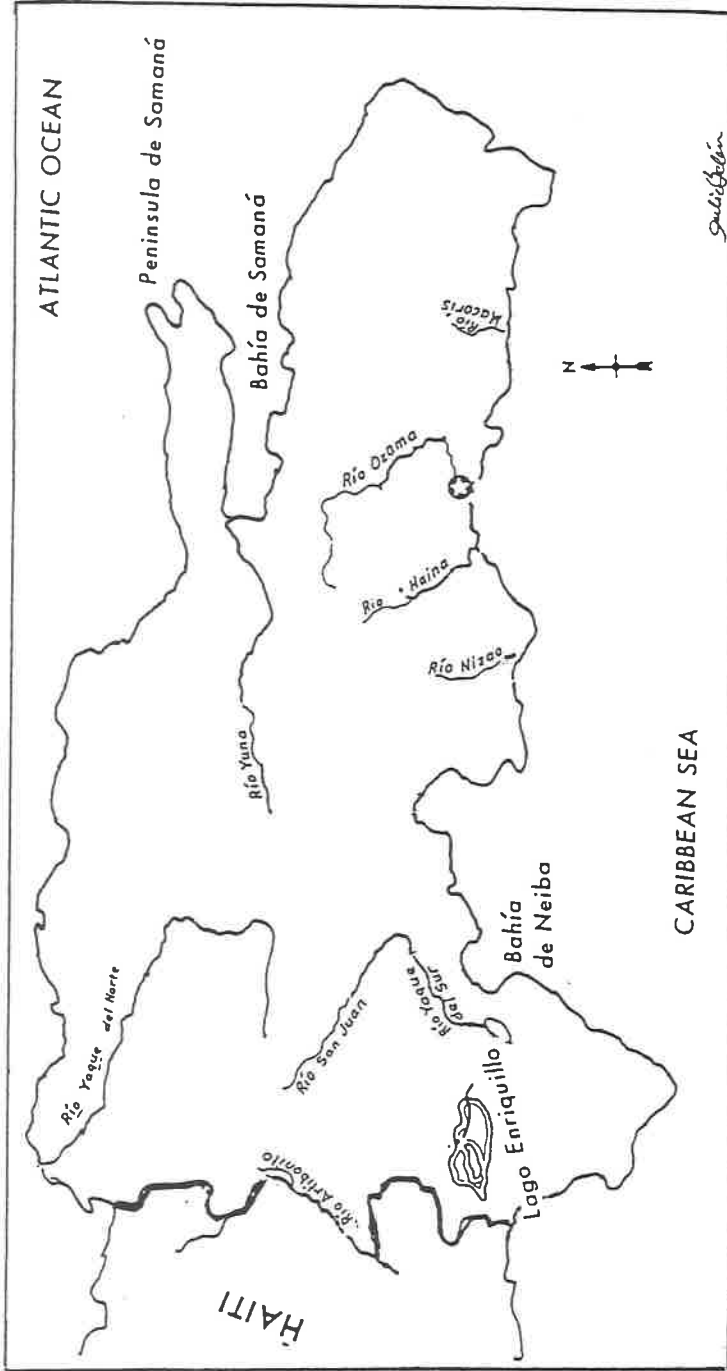
QUISQUEYA LA BELLA



The Dominican Republic
in Historical and
Cultural Perspective

Alan Cambeira

p 4. The River System of La República Dominicana



3

The Indigenous Heritage

In this section the primary objective is to delineate the ethnohistorical processes involved in the formation of Dominican culture. Contrary to what many investigators, analysts, and historians would have us believe, the process was quite simple. True enough, the arrival of Cristóbal Colón constituted a very major turning point in the ethnicity of the whole Caribbean region. But equally true is the fact that well prior to the year 1492, there were groups of indigenous peoples living in the region, trying to cope with their environment as skillfully as they knew how. These were people with a history, a culture, a reality—people who had been living for centuries in the Antilles when Columbus first encountered this other reality. Wheels, for instance, existed in the Americas long before Europeans did; ancient American cultures used wheels on children's toys. What arrived after the Great Encounter of 1492 was the notion of utilizing those wheels for purposes of work. The obsidian blades used by Aztec surgeons, in another instance, rivaled even modern steel for precise incision.

This other environmental reality was also one of contrasts and contradictions—seemingly the leitmotiv of what we have come to know as La República Dominicana. The natural topographical splendor of the region was then, as it is now, quite captivating to the visitor from outside. At the same time, however, the hazards remained real, then as now: violent and destructive hurricanes, earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, raging floods, diseases of epidemic proportions, insect plagues.

Despite the persistence of such life-threatening forces, the indigenous peoples confronted the frustrations and hazards with astounding creativity and sophistication. Their world was definitely one with unending problems and transitions. Their history is a combination of myths, beliefs, customs, and philosophies that enabled these early societies to adapt successfully to the prevailing circumstances.

The Original Inhabitants

It has been estimated that the original inhabitants throughout the entire Antilles probably numbered three-quarters of a million at the time of the Spanish invasion. Most substantiated theories seem to suggest that these first residents had migrated into the region from the nearby South American mainland, proceeding from the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela and the Guyana Highlands. Relatively uncomplicated migrations—a considerably long and steady process—were made possible because of the prevalence of quite favorable conditions. Facilitating these intrepid voyages by aboriginal groups were the advantageous winds and ocean currents. Moreover, the distances to be traveled would not have been a major deterrent. Basically, given the geological history of the islands in the region, it becomes clear that autonomous human evolution here is improbable. The islands are simply too young to have allowed for such evolution. It is still not absolutely certain just when human groups first inhabited the island of Haytí, or the other islands forming the Greater Antilles (the larger northern islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico). Archaeological evidence does suggest that the presence of humans in Haytí-Quisqueya dates to at least 3000 B.C., perhaps even earlier. Because of its size and location, this particular island may well have been the site of most of the region's aboriginal people. It was probably also the site of the most sophisticated cultural groups, with longer residency as well. From the mainland, one group after another arrived, partially expelling, partially incorporating and absorbing one another. Over a period of time, a certain fluidity, fusion, and merging took place.

The earliest Caribbean societies of the region's inhabitants, and the first element of the Ethnic Trinity of Dominican culture, exerted a profound impact on the future social evolution in the island. By the end of the fifteenth century, three different groups of people were predominant: the Ciboney, probably the oldest cultural community; the Taino-

Arawak, the least aggressive and most artistically creative; and then the fierce, warlike Caribe, after whom the entire region and the sea itself were named. The eastern Caribbean island of Dominica has the only remaining reservation for Caribs. Other important groups included the Ciguayo and the Macorix. These pre-Columbian cultures together represent the very first acknowledged victims of the consistent and often perplexing transition that characterizes the area's ethno-historical process. These original communities found themselves in a state of perpetual response and reaction to external circumstances. Eventually, within a relatively short time, the end would come to these societies. Infusions of Spanish conquistadors—either calculating designs to exterminate or inadvertently bearing pathogens that triggered pandemics—ultimately killed millions of aboriginal peoples who never before had seen or even heard of Europeans.

Any examination of the impact of the indigenous heritage begins with certain clear admonitions. First, this uniquely rich, primary heritage cannot be exaggerated. Of necessity and for historical accuracy, attention must be focused within appropriate limitations. Second, there must not be any attempt, however much unintended or unconscious, to romanticize this heritage or its impact. What occurs all too often is an erroneous and sometimes determined effort to overstate the case for the *raza aniquilada* (annihilated race) in order to downplay the more overwhelming impact of the African presence, powerful as it is in the formation of Dominican culture. The simple fact is that the assumed intensive, sustained contact between the Spaniards and Africans with the indigenous groups in the Antilles as a whole did not last much beyond perhaps fifty years! This fact in itself is the prime factor that absolutely limited the total impact that these earlier communities could have had in the evolutionary process. In Hispaniola nearly all the indigenous populations had practically disappeared by the middle of the sixteenth century. Of approximately 300,000 to 400,000 or more original inhabitants on Hispaniola, an estimated five hundred remained by the year 1548.

Thus, in less than sixty years from the year of the initial arrival of those three caravels—La Santa María, La Pinta, La Niña—some 500,000 aboriginal people had perished. The untimely disappearance of the native populations as a cultural entity was near completion. Their material as well as their spiritual world, their level of development, their way of life, were all being torn down and replaced by the

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ferocious intentions of an imposed social model known as the *encomienda* system,¹ which had replaced an earlier practice known as the *repartimiento*.² This large number of human beings disappeared as a consequence of the intricate operational strategies carefully devised by the conquistadors for the single purpose of exploiting the territory's gold. The Europeans had come, as later Spanish chroniclers would affirm, to give light to those in darkness, but also to get rich. But those assets of the Americas not counted in gold and silver only gradually engaged the rest of the globe's attention. The indigenous inhabitants of Española were undoubtedly the first victims of the process of initial accumulation of wealth in the sixteenth century. The process of deculturation was so swift that the subdued cultures hardly had time to acclimate themselves to the newly introduced, or rather, intrusive social modes. The strange and remotely alien systems bore no resemblance whatsoever to any sociocultural values or practices known previously to the original *quisqueyanos*.

The Taíno Culture

The differences between the aboriginal people and the Europeans were readily apparent and quite at odds. In fact, the differences were indeed awesome. The newer arrivals were in marked contradiction to the established traditions that had evolved over a lengthy period in the island. Taino society was basically communal and egalitarian in nature. There was no notion of private or individually owned property, for instance. Every available resource was the property of the whole community. The primary economic activity was agriculture, a necessary activity in which all members of the community both participated and benefited. The society itself had tremendous internal flexibility and mobility. In addition to agriculture, hunting and fishing were indispensable activities that helped sustain the community. Even by the time of Columbus's arrival, the Taíno were still being nourished by the meat of local rodents such as *jutias*, *curies*, *quemies*, and *mohies*, which were in abundant supply. Other common food sources included iguana and various other kinds of reptiles. Fishing, although not regarded as important as crop cultivation, and therefore not a major part of the traditional diet, was nevertheless routine. *Lambi*, *carey*, *dajao*, and *menjúa* appear on a long list of local fish still found today in the island rivers and streams and used as a supplemental food source,

especially along the coastal zones of La República Dominicana.

The essential social unit among these highly artistic, nonmilitaristic, cassava-producing agriculturists was a rather large family. This family was monogamous, except in the case of the local *cacique* (chieftain of the village clan), who usually practiced polygamy. A clan might be comprised of anywhere from five to eight families, all related by close blood lines. It is suspected that incest was part of the social norms within the clans. While the social structure was predominantly patriarchal, matrilineal inheritance was also frequently practiced. Taíno houses, traditionally arranged in a circle, were of two classic styles. One featured a conical roof and was round in shape. This kind of dwelling was called a *caney*. The other style was most often associated with the *cacique's* residence. It was large, roomy, and rectangular in shape. This was the classic *bohío*, the exact term still used today to describe the thatched-roof abode found in many rural zones throughout La República Dominicana. A notable characteristic of Taíno culture was the rather complex level of social interaction among the group members, making for a pivotal element in their group solidarity and identity. One of the main group leisure activities featured a kind of ball game played on an open court called a *batey*.³

The broader Taíno society was made up of theocratic chiefdoms. These were extensive political units consisting of many smaller villages, each ruled over by the local *cacique*. Major decisions and most laws governing the larger community were executed by an assembly convened by the Paramount Cacique. In active attendance were the local or territorial, subordinate chiefs. The entire island of Quisqueya was divided into five large administrative territories that were called *cacicazgos*.⁴ Together, the five *cacicazgos* formed a rather tightly knit federation, organized and governed with amazing similarity, given the expanse of the total land areas involved. The Paramount Cacique, with ultimate authority and prestige, reigned supreme, designating to the local chiefs all the minor and often purely ceremonial functions. The names of some of the most powerful Paramount Caciques can be found throughout Dominican society today: Behechio, Cayacoa, Coanabo, Enriquillo (a name that has become legendary), Goacanagari, Mayohanex, and Guarionex.

Abundant evidence seems to support the assertion that Taíno society was the least aggressive of the pre-Columbian societies in the Americas. Even though there was great cultural affiliation among the three

migrant groups that entered the Antilles region, especially between the Caribs and the Taíno-Arawak, major differences were nevertheless apparent. The social and political organization, even the religious system, of the Caribs exemplified a more bellicose, deliberately militaristic posturing than any other. The Taíno, by contrast, did not produce the strident militarism and religious fervor readily associated with the much larger continental empires of indigenous peoples in the Andes region, Guatemala and the Yucatán, or the Anáhuac Valley of Central Mexico.

The Taíno Spirit World

Religion played a key role in Taíno culture. The Taíno had a sophisticated, very formalized belief system structured around an intimate relationship between a complete pantheon of gods and humans. As with every other aspect of Taíno traditions, religion was also communal. The village *cacique* was highly respected, sometimes even feared precisely because the villagers considered him the authentic and sole spokesman for the gods, and as such was the only officially authorized agent who could communicate with the sacred spirit world via highly stylized anthropomorphic figurines. These skillfully crafted figurines or icons, most often made of bone, wood, stone, or the more popular ceramic, represented religious spirits called *cemi*. Venerated by the entire community, the *cemi* functioned as the medium of communication between the *cacique* and the particular deity. This extremely sacred ceremony was known as the *Rito de la Cohoba*.⁵ As part of the ritual, the participants inhaled a powerful hallucinogenic drug made from natural herbs that had been concocted for the express purpose of inducing a trancelike state, *perder la razón* (to lose reason). Supposedly, only while in this trance could communication directly with the spirit world be possible.

Within the social hierarchy was also a very special order of priests called *behiques*, who were viewed as wise men because of their mystical ability to communicate with the dead as well as with the *cemi*. These priests enjoyed many of the privileges of the village *cacique* and were also vested with the powers to cure the sick. So essential was their position in the hierarchy that certain tasks were assigned to them alone: serving as intermediaries to the gods, maintaining the religious-philosophical system on a level of daily observance, functioning as

advisers to the *cacique*, and educating the male offspring of the local chieftain. Much of the surviving, well-known ceramic art, especially the exquisite pottery, of this early Antillean culture is accredited to the *behiques*, since they were also at the same time the principal artisans among the Taíno. In effect, the entire body of customs, traditions, myths, and legends was the exclusive responsibility of these sacred individuals, who were the trusted custodians of Taíno culture.

Moreover, these traditions were systematically passed on orally from one generation to the next by means of sacred songs. These legendary songs, called *areitos*,⁶ were carefully metered verses, always sung and danced in the precisely exact manner in order to preserve their purity, and were featured at special festivals in honor of the *cemi*. By the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, the Taíno may well have been formulating definite concepts of monotheism. The idea of worshipping a supreme, omnipotent deity—a principal *cemi* called Yocahu—was in an embryonic stage. Yocahu was seen as the Supreme God of the Skies, perhaps even the god of creation.

The Taíno Legacy

What is agonizingly impossible to ascertain is the kind of ultimate social evolution that might have emerged had the Spanish conquistadors managed somehow to delay their encounter with the indigenous cultures on Quisqueya. True, by the time the Spanish penetrated the region and arrived with unmistakable designs of complete conquest at the island, Taíno culture was already undergoing rather significant and critical internal transformations. However, final surrender and subordination to the Spanish were inevitable in view of the striking differences in technology alone. Even with the formidable campaigns of early resistance by the determined native peoples, the military superiority of the equally determined invaders assured definite conquest of the indigenous inhabitants. Moreover, perhaps yet more potent was the introduction of infectious diseases previously unknown to the Caribbean region. These diseases decimated the indigenous populations more rapidly perhaps than did the invading artillery.

So, what constitutes the legacy of Taíno culture in terms of the ethnic components in the formation of Dominican culture? First of all, the total and complete decimation of the indigenous peoples in Hispaniola, however rapid, during the first century of Spanish colonization

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did not automatically mean that these cultures had a mere minimal impact upon subsequent social development there. Second, what survived of the island's native heritage would enrich considerably the local demographics resulting from this initial contact of the two vastly differing peoples. It is quite clear that large numbers of the early conquistadors and settlers took the Taíno-Arawak women—whom they perceived as exotic—as concubines and/or wives. The offspring of this unprecedented interracial fusion was to produce a startling new kind of human race that would be forever called *mestizo*.⁷ The process of what could be called miscegenation was thus officially launched in La Española with this daring union between the light-complexioned Spanish conquistador and the darker, bronze-toned indigenous woman.

There are most assuredly other visible traces of the Taíno legacy in La República Dominicana today. Surprisingly, certain cultural elements have persisted despite the overall brevity of intimate social interaction between the two dissimilar cultural groups. The Taíno-Arawak, for example, taught the Spanish some rather ingenious techniques in agriculture production, methods still employed by Dominican campesinos today. The common practice of *tumba y quema* (cutting down and burning) involved felling trees, clearing away the brush and weeds, chopping up the stumps, then burning it all in a huge mound. The remaining ashes, rich in nutrients, are left in place to fertilize the soil.

Conucos and Casabe

The pride of many a rural or even suburban home today in the Dominican Republic is the family's *conuco*, an indispensable, almost revered feature of the homesite. The *conuco* is a small plot of cultivated ground traditionally set aside specifically for the family's vegetable garden. Initially the *conuco* was monopolized by the cultivation of tubers such as *yuca*, *batata*, *yautía*, and *mapuey*,⁸ since these local plants did not require later storage.

Even though the Spaniards imported new crops such as sugarcane, oranges, lemons, and bananas, the aboriginal populations introduced the Europeans to tobacco, potatoes, peanuts, manioc, *maíz* (corn), squash and pumpkins, beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, pineapple, cacao, vanilla, and turkey—among a host of other indigenous good items. Of the myriad crops of the Americas, two in particular—corn and pota-

toes—spread so extensively throughout the world that these items readily became absolute staples of human survival. In terms of agriculture, which was the chief economic activity among the island's original people, there was undisputable significance for two crops. The first, *casabe* (cassava or manioc), perhaps more than any other crop, has played a pivotal role as a staple in the traditional Taíno diet as well as in that of Dominican society as a whole throughout the development of the island's culture. Quite early, *casabe* became to be regarded as *el pan del país* (the bread of the nation). It was then, and remains so today, an excellent nutritional food source.

The Spanish masters throughout the island expected indigenous laborers to produce a consistently high yield of *casabe*. Some historians even suggest that the subjugated populations at one point attempted sabotage of food-crop cultivation by willfully neglecting their own *conucos* of *casabe* in efforts to force a complete withdrawal of the Spaniards from the island. Unfortunately, as history indicates, the settlers were not driven into starvation. Rather, the indigenous groups may have inadvertently contributed, in however minor a way, to the process of their own annihilation. During the colonial era when Santo Domingo became the primary base of strategic operations for launching further territorial exploration and expansion, huge quantities of *casabe* were an essential part of the cargo onboard the departing vessels for the crews.⁹ Today the process of *casabe* production continues being virtually the same as that devised by the inventive Taíno centuries ago.

The second crop of tantamount importance that the Taíno also introduced to the newcomers was *tabaco* (tobacco). It survived Spanish conquest and domination of Quisqueya, reaching the levels of production as a profitable export crop from the late eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Still fundamentally an export crop, tobacco is a component of the traditional Antillean trilogy of the sugar-coffee-tobacco culture that is of such vital economic importance today to the annual revenue of the Dominican Republic. Tobacco production and manufactured tobacco products during the early nineteenth century replaced cattle raising altogether as the primary economic base in the Cibao Valley. The geographic factor in this northern zone of the country has always been key. Very favorable climatic and topographical conditions conspire to prove eminently suitable for the region's rich tobacco cultivation. Historically, tobacco was also destined to share center stage with sugar as