

The re-emergence of the Taino language

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Higuayagua Taino of the Caribbean luku Kairi

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ABSTRACT

For nearly four decades, a movement to reclaim Indigenous Caribbean identity has been steadily growing across the Caribbean and the diaspora. Historically, the indigenous people of the Caribbean were said to be extinct, victims of the genocide unleashed by the Spanish Conquistadors. So complete was this extinction that schools often taught that "not a single drop" of indigenous blood survived. Modern DNA sequencing revealed this extinction was a myth. Descendants decided to take matters and destiny into their own hands. Efforts to revive cultural traditions, spirituality and Language became the foci of all involved in this movement. This short paper is about one such effort, the reconstruction of a Tainan dialect, Hiwatahia: Hekexi Taino Language.

RESUMEN

Desde hace casi cuatro décadas, el movimiento de reclamo de la identidad Indígena del Caribe ha ido en crecimiento continuo tanto en el Caribe como en la diáspora. La historia que se ha difundido acerca de los pueblos indígenas del Caribe promulga que estos se extinguieron a causa del genocidio perpetrado por los conquistadores españoles. Dicha extinción se decía de tal magnitud que las escuelas a menudo enseñaban que "ni una sola gota" de sangre indígena había sobrevivido. Sin embargo, el análisis contemporáneo de secuencias de ADN a desmentido el mito de la extinción. Los descendientes actuales han decidido tomar control de las cosas y sobre todo de su destino lo que ha llevado a esfuerzos por revivir las tradiciones culturales y la espiritualidad, haciendo de la lengua el foco de atención de todos aquellos involucrados en este movimiento. Este breve trabajo describe un esfuerzo de reconstrucción de un dialecto del taíno, Hiwatahia: el taíno Hekexi.

1. INTRODUCTION

“The Taino are extinct,” we were told. “Taino language is gone and very few Taino words persist,” scholars maintained. This paradigm is the landscape in which the modern Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean found themselves. For Taino descendants, the road between the extinction myth and an active living language seemed impossible to traverse.

My name is Jorge Baracutay Estevez. I am a Taino descendant and appointed Kasike (Chief) of the Higuayagua Taino of the Caribbean. I speak both Spanish and English fluently, having learned both simultaneously. However, the Taino language has intrigued me the most and has been a life-long interest. As a child, I recall arguing with store owners who made fun of the *campesino* words and descriptions I used. “I need a dollar's worth of *ayama* (ah-oo-ya-ma) please,” I asked a store owner on one occasion. “What on earth is *ayama*?” he retorted. “That there,” I answered, pointing at the squash. “That is called *CALABAZA*, I will not sell it to you unless you call it by its proper name,” he said teasingly. “Well, if you do not call it *ayama*, I will not buy it!” I countered.

While the store owners thought we spoke “bad Spanish,” my mother explained that city folk did not understand many of our *campesino* words because they were not “Indios.” I grew proud of these unique words and wondered how many of these *campesino* words (many of which were indigenous) were still used in the Caribbean.

In the late 1980s, a small group of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans gathered in the Bronx, NY to discuss and celebrate their obscure and buried indigenous ancestry and identity. History painted the Taino as a weak, docile people, who were no match for the mighty Spanish. Naturally, at the end of this reported “HIS story,” my ancestors all died. In school, we were taught that the Taino were our precursors, not our ancestors. In intellectual discourse, the resounding voices expressed sadness that “Nuestros Indios,” (our Indians) as if we owned them, were wiped out, and exterminated from the very islands they called home for thousands of years. Others seemed almost glad that the Indios were no more, after all, Indians are anchors to progress, social Darwinism in effect.

Historical narratives in textbooks taught us that not a single Indian survived. Thus, few people cared about Taino culture, and none were interested in Tainan Language. It seemed curious to me that while history recounted stories of Taino people running to the mountains to escape the Spanish onslaught, the narratives of the city folk differed from that of the mountain/rural peoples. Our *campesino* grandparents often spoke of Indian relatives with pride. Rural voices mention Indio spirits in the rivers, caves, and forest. On the other hand, city folk, privy to higher education, believed that all Indians had gone extinct. They not only denied the Indians but Africans were also made “invisible!”

I was not the only one perplexed by these contradictions. In the late 1980s, a full-fledged Taino identity reclamation movement erupted. Within a few years, other Taino-identifying people gathered

all over the Caribbean and the diaspora. Groups dedicated themselves to changing the historical record, its half-truths, and whole lies. Most agreed that language played a crucial role in strengthening culture and identity. Relearning our ancient language was at the top of the list. But how could we? After all, there were no fluent speakers anywhere in the Caribbean. What were we to do?

2. WHAT IS TAINO IDENTITY?

The answer to this differs for individuals, families, or groups. Identity is fluid and not simple to describe. Anyone writing on Taino may feel inclined to lump our identities and personal histories together in one bag, but that is illogical and misleading. Thus, my answer to this question is my subjective opinion.

Caribbean-born people, particularly those born between 1940-1980, remember that schools, textbooks, and teachers described the demise of the Taino people as genocide (the destruction of an entire genome). Indians did not survive colonization in significant numbers. But DNA sequencing studies in the late 1990s revealed an inconvenient truth and game changer. Not only were Taino genes present in the modern population, but it is significant—a far cry from actual genocide. The Taino did not go extinct, but we were assimilated. While there are no full-blooded Taino people today, mixed-blood descendants abound on all the islands, particularly Spanish-speaking ones (Schroeder et al., 2018).

In recent years ancient DNA also revealed that the native population at contact was not 5 million or higher, as some historians claimed, but closer to one 1 million for the entire region! (Fernandes et al., 2021). Considering that today there are 30 million people in the area, it can be said that there are more people today with native ancestry than there were at contact, albeit of mixed origin.

Los que nacen en casa son de casa ('Those born at home are from home'); this sentiment was expressed by my mother one day while recounting a story of her youth. My mother believes that a person is connected to the place they are born in. To me, all humans are a single race. As I am tripartite, born on the island of Kiskeya (Dominican Republic), I feel connected to the land where I was born. When I look across the four sacred directions, I know that my mother before, my grandmothers, before her, etc, were all born on the island, and I happen to have genes that predate the arrival of the Spanish and Africans. These are connected to the oldest bones of the island. I am Indigenous to Kiskeya.

In the 1930's, my family risked their lives to rescue and hide Haitian refugees fleeing the Dominican army. My family has never been racist towards Haitians and Africans nor denied our African or Spanish ancestry. Those born at home are from home. From our perspective, the prevailing notion that a mixture makes you less than is ridiculous. The classic Taino people, mixed with Africans and

Spaniards, and all their children were born on Indian land. Taino means 'I come from a place' to me and others in my community. Few of us divide ourselves into pieces when asked, "what are you"? Members in the Taino community, be they Higuayagua (my tribe) or any other group, all know that Taino refers to Indigenous Caribbean peoples of mixed ancestry. None of us feel compelled to answer the *are you Taino?* question with a breakdown of every single ethnicity within us.

3. WHAT OF THE TAINO LANGUAGE?

When Columbus arrived, the dialects spoken by the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were mostly of the Ta-Maipurean Arawak language family (Granberry & Vescelius, 2004). This language is the most widespread of all Native languages in the Western Hemisphere. The Taino people were not a single ethnic group, as many assume; they spoke several distinct Arawak languages. Columbus recorded, however, that there seemed to be one universal language understood by all, a lingua franca of sorts.

It is possible, although not sure that a common trade language that relied on gesture/sign language could have been used. If this hypothesis is true, that would explain why the Spaniards believed there was one language. Consider that the word for gold was *nozay* in the Lucayos (Bahamas). Lucayan islanders captured by Columbus were used as translators on the other islands. In Kiskeya (Dominican and Haiti), the word for gold appears as *caona* and *tuob* as we had 3 documented dialects.

The Europeans recorded many of our words. However, nearly all were nouns. Complicating matters, they recorded words, often misinterpreting or mistranslating the true meanings of these words. Native topographical words range in the thousands across the Caribbean, but few were accurately translated and documented. Other words, such as those associated with flora and fauna, are easier to identify. Some 3200 words were incorporated into Caribbean Spanish; of these, around 20 were absorbed into English. Words like hurricane, barbecue, guava, savannah, tobacco, canoe, cay, barracuda, etc., are Taino.

One of the most remarkable and yet disturbing revelations came to me during a personal conversation with my good friend and advisor, Dr. Konrada Rybka, a Linguist specializing in Arawak languages. *Can you name one linguist outside Douglas Taylor who has worked exclusively on Taino Arawak?* he asked. To my dismay, I could not. While I have scores of Taino Arawak language books, papers, etc., not one book was authored by a linguist! It had never occurred to me to check if these authors specialized in language, especially the Arawak language. It turned out that Douglas Taylor, a linguist specializing in Cariban languages, had briefly compared Taino and Island Carib in search of cognates and other similarities. Taino, for the most part, was relatively unexplored. Suddenly, all the words recorded by the Spanish seemed suspect!

Modern multi-disciplinary studies in the Caribbean revealed that the Taino, although closely related genetically, were multi-ethnic. Although the majority were Arawak speakers, there were stark differences among them. Columbus noticed that some spoke harshly or gutturally, while others were softer and melodic. Nevertheless, they were able to understand each other. If they were using gesture in addition to having related oral languages, it makes sense that the Spanish believed they all spoke one language.

Other crucial points to consider are:

1) The Taino language, at contact, was continuously evolving due to movement within the islands. Although there are persistent rumors of families speaking some Arawak dialect in the Dominican Republic, nothing verifiable has ever come to light. One must be careful with such stories, though. For example, there were stories of family members speaking a foreign dialect, not patois, French, or anything else. After much scrutiny, I found that this language was Papiamentu, learned by some who had briefly migrated to Curacao!

2) Recorded Taino words are primarily nouns making it impossible to revive the language; this is a fact.

3) Spanish orthography was not standardized until the 1750s. Before this period, words were recorded differently depending on the Spanish province the writer originated from. An Andalusian would spell a word differently than a Castilian in another. It gets more complicated when we consider that the French, Dutch, Italian, and English also recorded Taino words as they sounded to them.

4) Taino cannot be revived; it can be reconstructed or reinvented by combining words left to us and mixing them with morphemes from related languages.

5) By exploring closely related languages, I hoped to eventually return to classic Taino in the hope of translating/deciphering the ancient tongue.

Douglas Taylor observed that Taino shares more cognates with Lokono than with any other Arawak language. Some linguists, such as Silvia Kouwenberg, believe that Classic Taino languages were mostly Lokono Arawak (Kouwenberg, 2007). Lokono is spoken in Suriname, French Guyana, and Guyana. Suriname is a predominantly Dutch-speaking country, while Guyana is English, and French Guyana is French/French creole. There were many language differences from island to island, and even within islands, particularly the larger islands such as Cuba or Kiskeya/Haiti (the Dominican Republic and Haiti).

It became clear why few have attempted Taino language revival or reconstruction. Of the few that have tried, even fewer have made significant strides. Realizing all of this, I came to a different conclusion.

4. THE CHALLENGES

Taino dialects were highly polysynthetic (agglutinative), meaning words are made by combining several morphemes to make one word. For example, the Hiwatahia word *Harutukuma* ('Milky Way'), is created by combining the terms *white, star* and *path*: *haruti + tukuya + uma* in this way - *haru-tuku-uma*. Interestingly modern Caribbean slang tends to do this as well, this phrase: *¿Cómo estás hermano? ¿Está todo bien?* ('How are you brother, is everything okay') is condensed to *que lo que manin, ta to?* As Spanish is not polysynthetic, it would have been quite challenging if not impossible, to translate words accurately and naturally misunderstood what the Taino people were relaying to them.

5. THE BIRTH OF HIWATAHIA- A NEO-TAINO LANGUAGE RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT

As a child, I learned to speak a little Portuguese by singing along to songs by Sergio Mendes of Brazil. Until I outgrew this music, I could speak three languages, Spanish, English, and Portuguese. I am not a linguist; that is abundantly clear. But my interest in Taino and other Arawak languages plunged me into the incredible world of linguistics. I have read everything I could get my hands on, books, articles, academic papers, etc. My friends Dr. Alexandra Aikhenvald, Dr. Konrad Rybka, and Dr. George Simon have been the most inspirational and have guided me.¹ They are the most amazing people I have ever met. Interviewing them and learning from them has enlightened me in many ways.

The realization that Classic Taino could not be revived was daunting, leaving me with two options: borrow a related tribe's entire language or borrow words from several languages and create a new language for a new era. In a private conversation, Dr. Aikhenvald advised me, "Jorge there is an entire world of Arawak languages you can borrow from." The first option felt like appropriation. Language is tied to a people's history and culture. To take another native group's entire language was wrong. The second option would allow me to explore various closely related languages and broaden my understanding of root words common in all Arawak languages. In addition, it could help in imagining how a plethora of Arawak languages converging in the Caribbean during migration periods came together.

In 2018 I started reading an Arawak Language book titled "Languages of the Amazon" by Dr. Aikhenvald. This book captured my imagination. In the opening chapter Dr. Aikhenvald referenced another linguist, Dr. Eithne B. Carlin, who spoke of the concept of "nested identity" (Aikhenvald, 2012, p. 28-31). The concept postulates that when diverse groups of people speaking multiple languages are either forced or opt to live together, a pidgin language emerges soon after. Inter-marriage and offspring usher in new identities; naturally, the various languages converge. The idea of new

¹ George Simon was Lokono man, good friend, Artist and Archaeologist from the village of Pakuri in Guyana.

languages emerging this way helped me realize that this must have occurred in the Caribbean's pre-history. In addition, I experienced something similar in my life.

Having been raised in the Washington Heights section of New York City, I somewhat understood this concept from personal experience. My neighborhood was predominantly white, Italians, Irish, Jewish, and German. Dominicans had just begun moving in. Our family was a blend of Dominican (mom) and Mexican (stepdad), and Guatemalan (My mother rented a room to two brothers from that country). My mother's cousin was married to an Argentinian woman. Our building was like the Latin American UN. There were Colombians, Venezuelans, Ecuadorians, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. Racism against Latinos was rampant. The Spanish speakers worked together, played, and partied like a big family. We often cracked jokes about each other's accents and the different words we used. *Bicho* meant 'bug' to Dominicans, Colombians, and Venezuelans, but it meant 'penis' to Puerto Ricans! Colombians did not use the word *tu* ('you'); instead, they used *vos* ('thou'). My Mexican stepdad used words like *pinche*, and Ecuadorians were fond of *chucha* etc. Although we all spoke Spanish with our regional differences and accents, you could hear how we had borrowed words from each other in time. To this day, I may yell out in anger *Coñazo pinche cabrón, chucha baina* combination of Ecuadorian, Mexican, Dominican and Puerto Rican slang curse words! I could see how different languages or regionalisms, as in our case once in contact, begin converging.

After reading Dr. Aikhenvald's book, I contacted her. One section mentioned Taino's resurgence, and I was curious about where she got her information and wanted clarification. I was amazed by her knowledge, patience, and willingness to engage me. I was fascinated by the concept of nested identity, but how could I possibly utilize this? I needed to learn more, much more. Dr. Aikhenvald recommended I read a copy of Dr. Eithne B. Carlin's book "A Grammar of Trio." The book is a study of a people known collectively as Trio (also Tiriyo and Tirio) by outsiders. They call themselves Tereno. They live in four villages in Brazil and Suriname; Palumeu, Tepu, Kwamalasamutu, and Sipaliwini. The Tereno people number around 2,100 in total. They speak a Cariban language, which has evolved from various Carib dialects and one Arawak language (Carlin, 2004). This evolution of new languages and identities is common in the Amazon and Orinoco region, perhaps in all of the Americas. The Waiwai people of Guyana also originated from intermarriage between distinct groups. In their case, the Tunayana (Carib), Mawayana (Arawak), and Taruma (language isolate) gave rise to these new people with a new language and identity in the 19th century! Nested identity became an option that could lead to a new Tainan dialect rather than guessing at what once was or could have been.

6. MAKING NEW STEW: CHOOSING ARAWAK LANGUAGES TO WORK WITH

I made a list of all the words in Taino dictionaries. I had already compiled a list of words gathered from Dominican, Cuban and Puerto Rican slang/rural words (which were remarkably similar.)² These words are perhaps 98% nouns just as continuing Taino words are. It is no wonder why most past revitalization attempts ultimately failed. Before choosing the right combination of Arawak languages to borrow from, which was entirely subjective, my first step was using one single orthography. All borrowed words, whether recorded in Spanish, French, Portuguese, English, or Dutch, had to be tweaked and re-spelled. This action alone revealed much. A word, such as *aynara*, is identical to *einara*, the first being spelled by English speakers while the second by Spanish.

I changed the Spanish morpheme *gua-* to the proper Arawak *wa-* ex: *maguana* became *mawana*. Ch or sh sounds became x. - ex: *churana* was now *xurana*. Words starting with the letter p were changed to b ex: *pananao* – *bananao*. Words beginning with the letter z became s ex: *zuimaco-suimako*. Soft c's became s, while hard c's became k. Cipey became *sipey* and *cutara* became *kutara*. Q words were also changed to k, ex. *cacique* became *kasike*. By spelling all classic or incorporated words this way, I was able to find more cognates and connections.

Identifying closely related Arawak languages to Taino was relatively easy. Although no linguists have ever worked exclusively on the Taino language, and with good reason, many had looked at cognates and compared and contrasted some words with Garifuna, Kalinago, and especially Lokono.

After reading “Taino’s Linguistic Affiliation to Main-land Arawak” by Silvia Kouwenberg, I was confident that Lokono was indeed the closest language to the classic period Taino. Most of the languages I borrowed from were from the Ta-Maipurean main Arawak branch. However, if needed words were not readily available in my language books, I borrowed from non Maipurean Arawak or Akawaio, a Cariban language.

Classic Taino - All recorded Taino words, such as toponyms, flora, fauna, and indigenous words gathered from modern Caribbean Spanish, were used, non were discarded. The only words we did not use were the names of our spirits/deities. My personal belief is that most of these are misunderstood and improperly translated. That is a separate project.

Lokono- This Maipurean language seems to have more cognates with Caribbean Arawak than any other. I consider Lokono the mother tongue of all Caribbean and coastal region Arawak

² Dominicanisms are non-Spanish words used in the country, much like slang. However, many of them are Indigenous or African. Cross-referencing the ones that sounded Indigenous with cognates from Arawak languages, helped determine if they were Taino or not. One such word is “sika” used in the Dominican Republic instead of mierda (feces) In Lokono Arawak “Isika” means the same.

derivatives. In 1492 Christopher Columbus's landed on the Wanahani island (Guanahani), home to the Lucayo people, a name they had for themselves. Lucayo and Lokono, both meaning people, are closely related. Lokono does have differences from classic Taino, but the cognates are amazing. This language has been recorded using English orthography as well as Dutch. In addition, the language has affixes that help it express modern concepts. Lokono, as well as the surviving Taino words, became the basis for Hiwatahia.

Wayu- Or Wayunaiki language is remarkable as well. Words I could not find in Lokono dictionaries I found in Wayu. In the Caribbean, to this day, particularly in the Dominican Republic, we use words such as *kakona* which women utter about cuddling their newborn child. *Esta es mi kakona* they say lovingly ('this is my baby!') The Wayu word *kakonwa* refers to the fruit of a tree or offspring, which is a clear connection to me. Wayu became the second go-to language. Wayunaiki is maipurean as well. A few Spanish words have made it into Wayunaiki. I steered clear of any Spanish words. The Spanish-Wayu dictionary I consulted was written using modern Spanish orthography.

Garifuna/Garinagu- This language is considered nu-Arawakan, meaning that it uses *Nu* as the first-person pronoun. In contrast, Ta-Maipurean languages uses *da* Initially, I relied on Garifuna words, but increasingly Garifuna words would not fit the structure/formulae I was developing. The very thing that makes this language beautiful also limited it for my particular project. This language is 45% Arawak, 25% Carib, 15% French, 10% English, and 5% Spanish). While it shares some cognates with classic Taino, more than half of the language is non-Arawakan. This phrase *al meme musalagu sesu* ('The same bat brain'), is an example of "Garifunized" Spanish. *al* = 'la', *meme* = 'mismo', *musalagu* = 'murcielago', *sesu* = 'seso'.

Garifuna is one of the most beautiful languages I have ever come across. A few Garifuna words did make it into Hiwatahia. Hiwatahia, like Garifuna, is a blend of languages. In this respect, Hiwatahia is similar to Garifuna.

Kalinago- Also known as Igneri, is an Arawakan language once believed to be Kalina (Carib). Historically it was thought that Carib men displaced the island's original inhabitants, the Arawakan Igneri, absorbing Igneri women into their collective. During the contact, the Spanish and later the English and French reported that the men spoke one language while their women used another. This "genderlect" is also found in Garifuna, closely related to Kalinago. Today, due to ancient DNA sequencing, it is believed that these peoples were Arawakan and that they were absorbing Carib men into their society. Whatever the case, the language contains many words similar to classic Taino.

Other Taino recovery efforts use Kalinago believing that the Arawak portion of this language is closest to Taino. Douglas Taylor analyzed and compared Kalinago, Taino, and Lokono. Although similar, Kalinago and Garinagu are similar in some instances to classic Taino; both are nu-Arawakan,

whereas Taino is closer to Lokono, which is Ta- Maipurean Arawak (Taylor, 1954). I refrained from using Kalinago because this language belongs to living people who are also trying to revitalize their language. Classic Taino was a mixture of various Arawak tongues. To eventually decipher the ancient language, I felt it better to stick with purely Arawak languages. Kalinago is about 40% Cariban. Words such as *guatu*, *seneko*, *guey*, *ahom* are Carib, not Arawak and certainly not Taino.

Tariana- is an endangered Maipurean language. This language has mixed heavily with the unrelated Tucano language in recent decades. Tariana men usually marry outside their tribe. Thus, in recent times, Tariana has increasingly adopted the Tucano language, as Tucano is considered the region's lingua franca. Throughout the Hiwatahia exploration, Tariana has been a go-to language and a guide. It will be a shame if this language dies out. Hiwatahia will keep many of their words alive.

Wapishana- is an Arawak language from Guyana and Brazil. It is closely related to Atorada, Mapidian, Mawakwa and Mawayana Arawak languages. It has also borrowed heavily from Pemon, a Cariban language. This language became a go-to when Lokono or Wayu could not provide the needed words. Unlike the other languages, Wapishana tends to end in consonants instead of vowels.

Añu Paraujano- another Ta-maipurean Arawak language is closely related to Wayu, yet not a dialect but its own language. One full speaker remained in 2014, but it is unknown if he/she is still alive. Efforts to revive this language have been going on for a while now. The language is beautiful. As with Wayu, many words are borrowed from Spanish.

Akawaio - is a Cariban language that provided some 12 words to Hiwatahia. This language has many Arawak loan words.

After carefully studying all the languages listed above, I imagined myself living in a multi-lingual community. How does nested identity begin to take shape? Was it a collective conscious effort or a gradual one? From that moment on, each time I looked at a word, I would place myself in a mythical village inside my head. I imagine listening to different Arawak languages, gradually learning new words, and choosing new words based on how easy they were to pronounce. I often had to choose one term from a single language over all the others, although they all sounded great. For example, if the term for ankle was absent from classic Taino, I looked at the word from each of the languages listed above. If a word sounded closer to Taino, I chose it. If there were few choices, I modified it, by changing their orthographic style to fit my own. As sentences began forming in my head and on paper, I played with them. The nested village concept began making more and more sense. My mind was my blackboard, and the words in my dictionaries became the people I was "speaking" with as I practiced pronunciation and cadence.

Originally, I envisioned this language work to be used only by members of Higuayagua, our tribal community. I never dreamed of it going any further than that, which is why we chose to call this effort

Hiwatahia which means ‘Higuayagua language’. We also wanted to make it clear that this was a new language. Most of our people however were opposed to “Neo-Taino”, which in a sense is accurate, thus we chose *Hekexi*, which translates to ‘new’.³

Although I am not a linguist, I was extremely confident of this project’s success. I realized that languages are created by people who are probably know nothing of linguistics. This realization felt like an ancestral blessing.

7. TRADITIONAL V MODERN

I entertained the notion of using a single traditional language's grammar and rules. After all, the closer the effort was to bonafide Arawak languages, the more authentic it would be, right? But then an epiphany hit me, for a language to be autonomous, it had to have a history with the people using it. Borrowing and modifying words were one thing, but the language had to reflect Caribbean Indigeneity. A new language should be based on the old, but it is new for all intents and purposes. This idea was not a limitation for me, it was freedom.

Both Lokono and Wayu had gone through a period of modernization. I noticed that before the 1900s, there were few affixes for plural, past tenses, present participles, and so on. So, I began creating my own in this way:

-nol ‘plural’- my ancestors used *no* as a pluralizer but only concerning kinship. I use *no* –‘plural’ for plural words.

ni ‘present participle’. From *ouni* which is also used as a present participle in some Arawak languages.- Only as a suffix. As a prefix or on its own, it translates to ‘water’.

-aki ‘past tenses’

a~kona ‘to walk’

li kona’ki ‘he walked’

naya do kona’ni ‘they are walking’

As previously stated, Taino/Arawak are agglutinative. A word ending in "a" followed by a word beginning with the same letter are joined, giving the phrase fluidity. For example:

da arikawa aniki’no becomes *d’arikaw’aniki’no*

³ Higuayagua Taino of the Caribbean is the name of our 501c3- Higuayagua Taino Luku Kairi is our tribal name. Hiwatahia Hekexi Taino Language is our language name.

I see hearts

'I see hearts'

We adopted this for all vowels. In the case of an affix such as *-aki* it follows the same rule. This rule is quite simple yet it enriches the language profoundly. For example:

Arikawa Arikawa'ki.

See Seeing

8. WHAT OF REFRIGERATOR? TRUCKLOAD? CELL PHONE? OUR ANCESTORS DIDN'T HAVE THESE WORDS!

Some in our community resisted creating words for contemporary concepts such as movies, cars, trucks, or alcohol/liquor. Although I understood this sentiment, I also felt that even if it were possible to recreate a language as it existed 537 years ago, it made no sense. Besides, we live in this time, with our eyes towards the future. If this meant making up words, so be it.

I recalled the Navajo and Comanche code talkers.⁴ Those warriors used their unique indigenous languages to create codes unbreakable by the Japanese at Iwo Jima or by the Germans in Europe. The Navajo did not have words for tanks or other modern equipment, so they improvised in such a way that not even fluent Navajo speakers could break their code!

besh-lo ('iron fish') meant 'submarine'

dah-he-tih-hi ('hummingbird') meant 'fighter plane'

debeh-li-zine ('black street') meant 'squad'.⁵

Arawak languages rely on similar concepts to create words. Switching affixes around changes the meaning of the words or create new ones, words such as ice, box, or refrigerator. Naturally, classic Taino does have a word for such concepts. Conceptually, ice is a cold water stone. In Hiwatahia 'cold' is *kurulu*, 'water' is *ni*, 'stone' is *siba*. Therefore, *kurusibaniho* is 'ice'. However, this word is rather long and can be shorted even further to *kusiba*.

My formula and focus consisted of this. I quickly amassed some 25,000 words in total. The words

⁴ During World War II 29 Navajo marines were tasked with encrypting their ancient tongue and create an unbreakable code. They operated in the Pacific theater. The Comanche, Choctaw and Hopi also had code talkers.

⁵ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/american-indian-code-talkers>

were pouring out of the dictionaries, and I was modifying them as needed. However, it soon reached a point where I could not continue speaking to myself! Higuayagua has about 2000 members in total, with some 750 online. Of these, perhaps 200 are active full-time. We formed 11 language teams made up of 4-7 members each. I gave them everyday words and phrases to practice. While some of them believed that perhaps they were competing against one another, they gave me much-needed feedback, which is how I determined which words worked best, which did not, and which words needed to be discarded. I also knew that due to personal responsibilities and a few impatient folks, the teams would whittle down to hopefully 15 if I was lucky. At the end of my little experiment, I ended up with 7. These were to be my future language teachers.

9. ENTER HURANI (WIND AND RAIN)

You alone can do it, but you cannot do it alone is an old cliché, but valid today nonetheless. The language classes progressed, enthusiasm increased, and critical feedback was constructive. Some questions were rather annoying but expected. Some of my folks wanted ever more complicated words, even though exercise required simple everyday speech. But it was fascinating to see Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, Haitians, and Jamaicans fluent in both Spanish and English thirsting, craving for more. The hunger to reconnect with our indigeneity is unbending. Could this be sheer romanticism, or are we indeed on a spiritual journey, reconnecting to echoes from a denied past?

One young lady, a tribal member, sister, and friend, extremely close to my heart, began attending classes, asking me critical questions that were hard to answer. Although I understood the questions, the technical linguistic names gave me problems. Her name is Jessie Hurani Marrero. I have known Jessie for many years. She began visiting me at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian every Monday to hear me do my weekly 2:00 pm Taino cultural program. I realized that after working on the language for such a long time, I understood much intuitively but could not express or share using correct grammatical terms. Jessie Hurani was the perfect choice to help in this endeavor.'

Jessie became a much-needed nightmare! I say this as a compliment. Hurani is a stickler for accuracy, dotting I's and crossings T's. She questioned anything she did not understand while offering constructive criticism. The language benefited from her input. Without her, I would probably still be working on the Dictionary. With Jessie on board, Hiwatahia took off. She took over language classes and the language teams so that I could focus on research and finding better-fitting words to borrow and modify. Ultimately, we ended up with two language teams, Team # 1, helped with self-publishing, Team # two became the *Tekina'no* ('teachers'). At about the same time, our tribal Tekina ('Teacher') Tomas Baibramael Rodriguez pledged to bankroll the printing of the dictionary.

We worked hard to keep the feel of interconnectedness to the natural elements, using literal and metaphoric meanings, a sense of fluidity in expression (several ways to express one concept), and an

indigenous mindset. We strived to keep the "spirit" while making the language comprehensive and easily understood by the 21st Century Taino. We wanted to incorporate "polite" words, such as *please* and *thank you*, or *would* and *may* (when used in an interrogative context)- *Ainka d'ausa oma bu A~ ka bohio tan Valerie? Muka'ki bu ikiwa kawaha da maudan? Arikoma bu.* 'May I go with you to Valerie's house? Would you please meet me early? Thank you.'

Again, this endeavor is neither a renewal nor a revival of Classic Taino. It is a reconstruction of the Taino language, hence the name, Hiwatahia: Hekexi (new) Taino. We took a clear-sighted and logical approach to reconstruct the language. Other than the apparent examination of the present-day use of other languages in the Arawakan language family, we looked at the grammatical structure of the Latin-based languages of Spanish, French, and Portuguese, as well as that of the Germanic language of English. The fundamentals of our Hiwatahia language structure were influenced by combining selected elements of the rules from these tongues into a sensible, usable, applicable form while remaining mindful of the indigenous mindset. Creating a functional system of language structure with only the tools of surviving nouns, affixes, and toponyms is not easy. After much research, contemplation, comparison, discussion, trial and error, time, and application, we formulated an entire system for the Hiwatahia language structure. We have composed a solid grammatical foundation for a living, growing language, complete with verbs, verb tenses, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns, new and surviving nouns, and expressions of possession.

Jessie says: Our effort is not the first, but it is unique. Others have attempted similar work in the past. Our dedication, research, and relentless pursuit of a fully comprehensive Taino language reconstruction set us apart from prior attempts. As Taino identity grows, the need for a sovereign language, created by us and for us, becomes our primary goal. To reach as many of our people as possible and for posterity, we self-published and printed our dictionary, "Hiwatahia: Hekexi Taino Language Reconstruction". It has been an enormous success. Currently, we are working on a Second Edition and a Spanish/Hiwatahia version. The language classes were streamlined and offered to all our Higuayagua members. Members have been active in creating language lesson plans. Others have created songs, poems, and prayers. One young woman has created an entire self-guided meditation with the language.

10. LAST THOUGHTS

One member, Alexander Adams, has created a language app that works similarly to "Google Translate" and another that functions similarly to Facebook. The language app translates simultaneously from English to Hiwatahia. Alexander is as relentless with technology as I am with language! He is constantly updating the app. This app is truly a blessing for us. Alexander's vision is to share this technology with our indigenous relatives in a similar situation or perhaps try to preserve

the last vestiges of their language.

A member of one particular Northeastern tribe working on his own language informed us that he had reached out to a company that develops this type of software. The company demanded a ridiculously high sum of money and wanted the copyright to their Native Language!! It is no wonder native people distrust the western world even today. Our tribe, Higuayagua Taino of the Caribbean, will continue striving to better ourselves and all our relatives of the Western Hemisphere.

As we embarked on this language quest, our primary focus was that the result would be a product "created by us, for us, and controlled by us. As of this writing, our language app is 90% accurate and will soon be available to all interested.

As a young boy, I stood in that grocery store with my little fists clenched, gritting my teeth as the adults made fun of the "backward" words I used. I was angry and wanted to prove them wrong. I have always been proud of our Campesino/ indigenous ways. I thank the creator for that moment in time and space for it led me down this wonderful road of self-discovery, meeting wonderful people traversing it alongside me.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Arikoma bu Yokahuwama bia auta'ni daka

A~Arikawa, A~ Abakama, A~ Adira, kena A~ Entowa ahan katu

(‘Thank you creator for allowing me to see, to listen, to feel and to understand- so be it’)

Kasike Jorge Baracutay Estevez and Tukada Jessie Hurani Marrero

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