

## The Power & Limits of Language: Linguistic Reclamation as a Driver of Taíno Identity in Borikén

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### ABSTRACT

The story of the Taíno people has been historically told from the narrative perspective of the dominant colonial viewpoint, which has been continuously employed as a tool to reinforce the idea of the Taíno community's "extinction" or nonexistence. This paper outlines the role of the Taíno people as a key element within Caribbean indigeneity and demonstrates the central ways in which Taíno culture has been reinterpreted and carried forward in modernity. To this end, it assesses the lasting impact of language within the cultural landscape of Taíno nationhood.



**Source:** *Lorianne DiSabato, "Taíno Mural," June 21, 2013.*

**Keywords:** *Borikén, language reclamation, Taíno, Jibaro-Boricua*

### BIO

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In order to explore the overarching process of Taíno revival in Borikén, I address the following research question: how have attempts of language reclamation shaped Taíno culture within Jíbaro-Boricua groups in Puerto Rico? I argue that efforts to reclaim the Taíno language have shaped indigenous culture in two main ways: (1) the efforts represent a critical effort to place translocal and indigenous voices at the center of the conversation, by shifting the debate beyond “authentic” or “legitimate” definitions of culture, and (2) they demonstrate the potential to transform and decolonize the field of indigenous studies by questioning the narrative of the Taíno people as “erased” or “extinct” figures.

### **Discoveries and Movements Created Through Language: The Taíno Case-Study**

In the context of the Hispanic Caribbean, scholars have analyzed indigeneity in Borikén through archaeological studies,<sup>1</sup> as well as through politics<sup>2</sup> and mythology.<sup>3</sup> However, Taíno and Jíbaro-Boricua groups in Puerto Rico have approached the issue of culture from an entirely distinct viewpoint altogether. They have sought to reconstruct the Taíno language, in an effort to rediscover another cultural facet of their identity and add to existing efforts towards Taíno revival. The task of language reclamation has been largely met with skepticism by linguistic scholars, given that there are few records from which to redevelop the linguistic code.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the challenges involved, some indigenous groups, such as the Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro Boricua (MIJB), have focused their efforts on a long-term comparative reconstruction of Taíno vocabulary and pronunciation.<sup>5</sup> Other groups, such as the Guaka-Ku and the Liga Guakía Taína- Ké, have instead sought to popularize and consolidate specific terms of Taíno vocabulary in their everyday speech, as well as develop clear writing systems meant to encode such Taíno terms. The debate around such efforts to revive the Taíno language has raised questions on what terms and expressions should be categorized as part of Taíno language, as well as who should hold the authority to make such decisions. The General Council of Taíno (GCT), however, has made a very clear argument: anything said in any language by a Taíno/Boricua person can be defined and viewed as Taíno/Boricua.<sup>6</sup>

Extensive research has been developed on the impact of Taíno/Boricua activism on racializing regimes and on nationalist projects throughout Puerto Rico’s history. However, there has been less focus on the defining factors involved in identifying oneself as part of an ethnoracial group that is (incorrectly) considered to be nonexistent. Feliciano Santos highlights in her research that one of the driving reasons that motivate Taíno/Boricua activists to engage in projects of language revival is the desire to expand their

<sup>1</sup> Alvarez Nazario, Manuel. 1996. *Arqueología Lingüística: Estudios Modernos Dirigidos Al Rescate Y Reconstrucción Del Arahuaco Taíno*. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.

<sup>2</sup> Feliciano-Santos, Sherina. “How Do You Speak Taíno? Indigenous Activism and Linguistic Practices in Puerto Rico.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2017), 6-8.

<sup>3</sup> Arrom, Juan Jose. 2000. *Estudios de Lexicología Antillana*. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.

<sup>4</sup> Feliciano-Santos, Sherina. “How Do You Speak Taíno? Indigenous Activism and Linguistic Practices in Puerto Rico.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2017), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

cultural understanding or connection to ancestors, as well as to develop the knowledge and information set required to gain recognition from the government and reclaim rights to sacred grounds.

Although many Boricua groups regard the project of language revival to be a critical step in mobilizing activism and culture, the Taíno case-study presents a unique set of challenges. Scholars estimate that Taíno was spoken as a native or mother-tongue language in Puerto Rico sometime around the 16th century.<sup>7</sup> As such, there are limited linguistic resources and data from which to draw when analyzing attempts to reclaim the Taíno language. Furthermore, unlike other minority languages such as Wôpanâak<sup>8</sup> and Manx,<sup>9</sup> there are no bible translations, vocabulary databases, or legal documentation that could assist scholars in the reconstruction project. Currently, the recorded documents that display vocabulary from the Taíno language are scarce, but there are certain records that have been utilized in the process. For instance, there are sections transcribed in Taíno in the early journals and chronicles from expeditions to the Americas. Since Taíno was an Arawakan language, as evidenced by linguistic research, other related Arawakan languages have also been utilized to reconstruct pronunciation and phoneme aspects of the language.<sup>10</sup>

Projects of language reconstruction, when devised with the intention of contemporary use, often become the podium for longstanding cultural debates between a variety of social actors. To this end, the reclamation of language and culture can be understood not only as an emblem of the associated group's resilience and visibility, but also as a pathway to pragmatic realms such as government recognition or the reacquisition of sacred sites and land.<sup>11</sup> However, although groups such as the GKT have indeed demonstrated a more pragmatic facet to Taíno language reclamation efforts, it is different from other linguistic revival cases in that its main purpose is not contemporary use. Feliciano-Santos highlights that Taíno language practices are not anchored in any set of expectations of what Taíno should look or sound like. This is because while some Taíno/Boricua individuals do draw their conception of the language to the ways their ancestors spoke, others do not necessarily hold that same objective. For some individuals, speaking Taíno is not about sounding or speaking in the same way as their ancestors, but instead about reconnecting to their conception of nationhood and of what it means to be Taíno. As such, scholars note that language reclamation efforts are more concerned with progress and connections than they are with accuracy. Here, activists are shown to raise several critical debates on the question of Taínoness and on how to effectively create markers of continuity

<sup>7</sup> Arrom, Juan Jose. 2000. *Estudios de Lexicología Antillana*. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.

<sup>8</sup> Makepeace, Anne, dir. 2010. *We Still Live Here (Âs Nutayuneân)*. Bullfrog Films.

<sup>9</sup> Ohlfearn, Tadhg. 2014. "Sociolinguistic Vitality of Manx after Extreme Language Shift: Authenticity without Traditional Native Speakers." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (2015), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Granberry, Julian, and Gary Vescelius. 2004. *Languages of the Pre-Columbian Antilles*. Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 20-24.

<sup>11</sup> Feliciano-Santos, Sherina. "Negotiation of Ethnoracial configurations among Puerto Rican Taíno Activists." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 7 (2019), 1152.

to which indigenous members can culturally connect and embrace. The movement entails, for instance questions on what counts as a Taíno/Boricua language, which linguistic codes to assess, who has the authority to make decisions on orthography, and on what language varieties are included.<sup>12</sup>

There have been distinct approaches to language reclamation in Borikén. The Guaka-Ku (GK) and Liga Guakía Taína-Ké (LGTK) communities, for instance, have actively searched and researched Taíno words with the purpose of adding them to common speech, thus substituting everyday Spanish words wherever possible. For community members, this has been considered a way to reconnect with their roots, reinsert Taíno terms into their vocabulary, and to shift away from the European or Spanish linguistic norms. These groups' actions reflect what scholars would designate as an "enactive" language approach,<sup>13</sup> where Taíno terms are shown to hold a regenerative and transformative effect on how GK and LGTK members perceive their communities and surroundings.

In addition, there have been language revival projects that seek to restructure the overarching framework around Taíno language. The Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro Boricua (MIJB) is a group that claims that the languages spoken by Jibaro-Boricua groups hold Mayan roots. As such, community members draw influence from Yucatec-Maya morphology

in order to reshape and reassess commonly known indigenous words. These words have typically been appropriated by the Spanish vocabulary; therefore, the employment of such terms within an indigenous context, in a project that seeks to restructure indigenous phonemes and words, is also seen as a reclamation effort in and of itself.

The Taíno Nation (TN) is another critical group within language reclamation efforts in Borikén. Since the 1970s, they have sought to employ efforts to reconstruct Taíno vocabulary based on words from Arawakan languages that are still spoken.<sup>14</sup> Taíno Nation's efforts are a key demonstration of the value that reconnection and reclamation holds within linguistic projects. Their approach is largely not concerned with accuracy, but instead with nationhood and culture. Taíno Nation's linguistic project does not claim to provide an accurate or universal take on how Taíno language was structured, nor does it aim to reconstruct the language as it was spoken in the 16th century. For the Taíno Nation community, language reclamation is not an endeavor to reconsolidate the linguistic realities of the past, but instead to provide pathways for its members to reconnect with emblems of their traditions.

Both the Taíno Nation and the Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro Boricua (MIJB) consolidate a comparative assessment on Taíno vocabulary, drawing from a philological approach. They strive to develop a referential viewpoint that enunciates Taíno

<sup>12</sup>Feliciano-Santos, Sherina. "How Do You Speak Taíno? Indigenous Activism and Linguistic Practices in Puerto Rico." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2017), 6.

<sup>13</sup>Rumsey, Alan. "Wording, Meaning, and Linguistic Ideology." *American Anthropologist* 92 (1990), 346–361.

<sup>14</sup>Feliciano-Santos, Sherina. "How Do You Speak Taíno? Indigenous Activism and Linguistic Practices in Puerto Rico." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2017), 6.

visibility and reinforces its presence, creating a link between self-identification and language. This process is critical because it allows the Taíno community to shift the framework of what it means to be Taíno, and provides a pathway towards self-determination where community members obtain the space needed to develop their own decision making and their own self-identification. Ultimately, language reclamation is seen as one of the avenues available to shift the balance of power towards minority groups and to allow them the voices and spaces needed to deconstruct the colonial narrative of the Taíno community as “extinct”.<sup>15</sup>

If we apply this same conception to the language reclamation efforts of the General Council of Taíno (GCT) group, another key connection between self-determination and language comes to the forefront. The GCT has continuously criticized the formal or “textbook” format of the Taíno language reconstruction project, due to their belief that speaking Taíno is a spiritual manner. It is important to note that the GCT is not against language reclamation efforts – instead, they argue towards a linguistic project that does not necessarily define orthographical or phonetic norms, and instead redefines the language within the context of culture. As such, their argument has shifted the debate on language reclamation from the realm of structure towards the sphere of cultural reconnection. Here, they highlight the importance of language as a defining element of ideas, expression, and motives,

rather than a normative structure. Within the GCT framework, each indigenous group has the voice to define what falls under the umbrella of their language.

### Conclusion

Manuel Forte posits that indigenous identities in the Caribbean region are constantly being reproduced, rather than “invented”.<sup>16</sup> If we apply his argument to the case of Taínos in Puerto Rico, how one expresses Taíno culture in 2020 will not be the same as in 1492. The Taíno case-study of language reclamation demonstrates that how one expresses indigeneity is relational, and that the pathways utilized by communities to connect to the land and culture are constantly shifting. While the dominant colonial discourse is that Taíno people are extinct, various communities in Borikén prove otherwise. Oral societies convey and document their culture and histories in a range of different ways, such as songs, crafts, dances, instruments, and constructions.<sup>17</sup> Although language reclamation efforts pose various challenges – especially in terms of accessing documentation and debates around different definitions of nationhood – it also brings forward a critical step in reshaping the construction of what it means to be Taíno.

The experiences lived by communities such as the Guaka-Ku (GK), the Liga Guakía Taína- Ké (LGTK), the Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro Boricua (MIJB), as well as several others, provide critical insights on the intricate accomplishments and challenges of language reclamation efforts

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Forte, Manuel. 2006. The dual absences of extinction and marginality—What difference does an Indigenous presence make? “Indigenous resurgence in the contemporary Caribbean: American Indian survival”. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

<sup>17</sup> Neeganagwedgin, Erica. “Rooted in the Land: Taíno Identity, Oral History and Stories of Reclamation in Contemporary Contexts.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 11, no. 4 (2015), 380.

in Borikén. By employing the vocabulary and expressions of their culture, the Taíno people continue to share their connection to nationhood and tradition through various tools. As such, through the efforts of their community, language may continue to be a critical pathway with which to reclaim their narrative, and to tell their story. To this end, Manuel Castells writes: “the village is not left behind; it is transported with its communal ties”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kirtiklis, Kę. "Manuel Castells' Theory of Information Society as Media Theory." *Lingua Posnaniensis* 59, no. 1 (2017), 67.

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