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Amerindian mtDNA does not matter: A reply to Jorge Estevez and the privileging of Taino identity in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean

By Gabriel Haslip-Viera

In his article “Amerindian mtDNA in Puerto Rico: When does DNA matter?” Jorge Estevez makes a spirited defense of indigenous identity and the mtDNA research completed on Puerto Rican islanders and other Caribbean Latin@s by the geneticist, Juan Carlos Martínez Cruzado and his colleagues. However, this defense of genetic research connected to indigenous identity is deficient in a number of ways. For the most part, Mr. Estevez merely reiterates the assertions made by Martínez Cruzado and his colleagues, without really engaging my assessment of this research. He also raises a number of issues with regard to culture and linguistics that were not discussed in my article, and he suggests that I hold certain assumptions and made certain statements that I did not make in my critique.

mtDNA Research and genetic ancestry testing in general

For starters, I never claimed that the percentages provided by Martínez Cruzado and his team on mtDNA in Puerto Ricans were inaccurate, even though I also have serious reservations about the scientific validity of this research. It was clearly stated in my article and its subtitle that the indigenous mtDNA found in 61 percent of Puerto Rican islanders is insignificant because almost all the persons in an individual’s family tree dating back to the 16th century are not analyzed. All persons living today have two parents, four grandparents, eight grandparents, sixteen great grandparents, and thirty-two great, great grandparents (see Figure 1). Projecting further back in time, each of us had 128 parental ancestors in 1790, 1,024 in 1700, and 16,384 in the 1580s, when pure blooded Taínos (my emphasis) probably became extinct.¹ In actuality mtDNA, which is traced through a single female line (see black boxes in diagram), only constitutes a tiny element or residue of the total genetic composition of each Caribbean Latin@ if the family tree is projected back to the end of the sixteenth century. This means that Martínez Cruzado and his team have traced the indigenous mtDNA of only fifteen females in a family tree of 16,384 individuals over the course of fifteen generations.

Martínez Cruzado and his team have also completed preliminary but unpublished research on the Y-chromosome of Puerto Rican islanders; however, this research has not received the kind of attention and hyped-up publicity that the mtDNA research has received. Unlike mtDNA, the Y-chromosome is passed exclusively through
the paternal line (father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc.), and like mtDNA, it represents a very small part of each individual’s genetic history. As reported to journalist Juan González, 70 percent of 800 Puerto Ricans sampled by Martínez Cruzado had the Y-chromosome of Europeans, 20 percent had the Y-chromosome of Africans, and only 10 percent had the Y-chromosome of Amerindians (not necessarily Taíno). This constitutes almost the reverse of the ethnic background for percentages of female mtDNA in the same population and provides strong evidence for demonstrating that the Puerto Rican population is thoroughly mixed. The limitations of this research for mixed populations was also demonstrated in my own case about a year ago when I was informed that my mtDNA was of African origin despite the appearance of my white-complexioned mother, and my Y-Chromosome was of European origin despite my father’s “mulatto” appearance.

At one point in his essay, Mr. Estevez challenges me to answer the following question: “If 61 percent is not significant, then what percentage is?” The answer to this challenge is not to be found in mtDNA or Y-chromosome research, but potentially in what is referred to as “genetic ancestry testing” or “admixture mapping,” which attempts to determine the relative contribution of selected ancestral populations to an individual’s genome. This kind of test analyzes an individual’s “autosomal DNA,” or the majority portion of a person’s genetic material in an effort to determine the ethnic breakdown in percentages of an individual’s genetic make-up. Unfortunately, there are currently major problems with this kind of testing because of incomplete databases, contradictory results, disagreements on how to define ethnic groups, and the curious anomalies that sometimes emerge, such as the finding that a South Asian Punjabi had 8 percent Amerindian ancestry. In any case, a number of persons claiming a Taíno pedigree have been shocked to learn that their Amerindian ancestry is quite minor or practically nonexistent as a result of these tests.

In an internet posting, “Marisol” is shocked to learn that her ancestry is 80 percent European, 16 percent Asian, and only 3 percent Native American. “Marisol” is subsequently consoled by a number of respondents who equate Asian ancestry with the Native American, but who nevertheless ignore the importance of the 80 percent figure for European ancestry. In another internet posting, “Elder” Jim Runningfox (aka: James López) of the “Aymaco Taíno Tribe,” is surprised to learn that his ancestry is 80 percent European, 13 percent Sub-Saharan African, and only 7 percent Native American, with 0 percent East Asian. In a statement to tribal members,
Mr. Runningfox describes how he is particularly puzzled by the European and the
“South Sahara African results,” which he feels are “too high.” He also considers quitting
the Aymaco tribe because of the test results, but is dissuaded by respondents, including
Mr. Estevez, who claim that 7 percent Amerindian ancestry (Mr. Estevez), or even “1 drop
of Taíno blood” (Cacike Coqui) is sufficient for continued membership in the tribe. 6

Mr. Estevez also fails to mention the results of his own admixture test, which
appears in a book chapter that he co-authored with anthropologists Lynne Guitar
and Pedro Ferbel-Azcarate (aka: Peter Ferbel). 7 Mr. Estevez reports that he has
“a significantly high quantity of indigenous markers” but fails to provide the
percentages “within five generations” that he states are provided by the company,
DNA Print Genomics. 8 He also states that he was told that “just four generations
ago” his ancestors “were what used to be called ‘full-blooded’ natives.” However,
companies of this type have been criticized for telling clients what they would like to
hear. 9 Curiously, Mr. Estevez also minimizes the importance of genetic testing in his
section of the co-authored chapter while emphasizing its importance in the response
to my article. He states that “we Taíno as a people, validate the DNA evidence,
not the other way around,” and that “the journey of self discovery...is about culture,
not genes, for genes say little about us as a people.” 10

History
Despite suggestions or claims to the contrary, I do not assume that “history is
without bias” and “cannot lend itself to scrutiny or re-interpretation.” On the
contrary, professional historians are trained to continuously search for new
evidence that may result in historical reinterpretation. The discovery of important
new evidence and the reinterpretation of that evidence is what often elevates the
reputation and status of historians in the discipline. A recent example is the history
of the so-called “classic” Maya of southeastern Mexico and western Central America
(AD300-AD900), which has undergone a profound change during the past twenty-
five years as a result of the interdisciplinary work of archaeologists, epigraphers,
and historians. Now that the Maya hieroglyphic writing system has been largely
deciphered, a new history has been written that portrays the Maya in a much more
realistic and multifaceted manner. The earlier view alleged that the Maya were a
peaceful farming people who lived around impressive looking ceremonial centers that
housed artisans, merchants, and an intellectual priestly elite obsessed with astronomy
and astrology based on their advanced system of writing and mathematics. 11

Now that the hieroglyphic writing system can be read, we know that the classic Maya
were much more complex and quite violent. Along with a peasant base, there were
cities and city states with substantial populations that included artisans, merchants,
warriors, aristocrats, and hereditary rulers (“kings”) who traded, formed alliances,
and fought each other over political influence, territory, and status in the region.
There were even two large powerful and influential city states, Tikal and Calakmul,
that fought a 150-year-long war for influence and control of the Maya region;
this conflict can be compared to the 27-year-long war fought by the ancient Greek
city states of Sparta, Athens, and their allies in the fifth century B.C. 12

Mr. Estevez is very selective when it comes to his acceptance of historical
evidence. He is dismissive of the census enumerations that were done by the Spanish
authorities during the course of the colonial period in Puerto Rico. 13 However, he is
quick to accept without question the racialist judgments of Anglo-American officials
and anthropologists who reported on the populations of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the
Dominican Republic in the aftermath of the 1898 Spanish American War. It is not clear, for example, why Jesse Walter Fewkes and Sven Lovén are quoted. They refer to “mestizos,” or persons of mixed background who “still preserve Indian features to a marked degree.” They are not referring to surviving Indians or Taínos. The quotes from Michael Harrington and U.S. Army General George W. Davis, who briefly served as governor of Puerto Rico, are equally problematic. We need to be reminded that in the aftermath of the Spanish American War, Anglo-American officials, anthropologists, and others were generally mystified by the diversity in physical appearances that they encountered in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—especially within families. As would be expected, Harrington and Davis applied and articulated their own racist ideas and stereotypes on the people they described in their reports and publications. In their travels, they encountered people in Cuba and Puerto Rico whom they thought conformed to the Amerindian physical stereotype as conceptualized in Europe and the United States, but in actuality, we do not know what the pre-Columbian Taínos looked like with any kind of precision.

Mr. Estevez and other advocates of Taíno survival also suggest or claim that hundreds or perhaps thousands of Taínos were able to establish independent communities in the mountainous interior regions of the islands during the course of the sixteenth century, and that these populations are the basis for indigenous survival into the twenty-first century. Mr. Estevez quotes or paraphrases the work of anthropologist Lynne Guitar, who states that “colonists and Spanish administrators in the sixteenth century manipulated their reports, letters, censuses and histories for their own social, economic and political gain,” and that the Spaniards had only a few outposts, towns, and cities and never governed the islands in their entirety. These comments are nothing new and have been articulated elsewhere by others; however, there is no evidence that large numbers of Amerindians were able to establish independent communities in isolation of the Spaniards. The Spaniards were fully capable of scouring the islands in search of Indians to enslave or employ in the gold mining enterprises and plantations, as was the case in Hispaniola in 1493–1495, or in Brazil with the Bandeirantes and other slave traders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The historical evidence shows that impoverished Spaniards and Africans also fled or migrated into the interior regions of the islands, and as a result, what emerged over the centuries is what is seen at the present time—mixed populations of mostly African and European background with minor vestiges of the indigenous.

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Culture
The apparent suggestion that I may have claimed that Taíno culture is extinct is also not true. I did not discuss culture or cultural influences in my article, but a number of assertions made by Mr. Estevez with regard to indigenous cultural influences are also problematic. For starters, it is not true that Taíno culture has been minimized in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. On the contrary, the influence of Taíno culture has been exaggerated out of all proportion to its actual importance. A tripartite cultural heritage that combines European, indigenous, and African elements has been promoted in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and to a lesser degree, in the Dominican Republic since at least the late nineteenth century; the indigenous (or “second root” after the Spanish) is seen as more important than the African. In Puerto Rico, there are many more museums devoted to the Taíno and their legacy than there are museums devoted to African culture and its influence. In the Dominican Republic, the Museo del Hombre Dominicano (Museum of the Dominican Man) continues to devote a much larger space to the indigenous than it does to the African despite the greater importance of African culture in that country. In a recent book, sociologist Ginetta Candelario has shown how the cultural establishment in the Dominican Republic continues to resist the inclusion of displays that highlight the African legacy. There also is no truth to the claim that the influence of the Taíno language on the vernacular of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean has been minimized. Mr. Estevez fails to make reference to the important work that has been done on this topic by Manuel Álvarez Nazario, David Cruz de Jesús, Edwin Miner Solá, Rodolfo Cambiaso, and Emilio Tejera, among others. At one point, Mr. Estevez also states that “it would be interesting to find another ‘extinct’ culture that has influenced the language and material culture of another to the extent the Classic Taíno have.” This thoroughly overblown statement seems to ignore the many “extinct cultures” that have had a much more profound influence on the peoples and cultures of the modern world—the most obvious being the influence of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Mediterranean world in the areas of art, architecture, language, law, philosophy, politics, and religion. The issue here is not the extinction of Taíno culture, which has had some influence on the contemporary cultures of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, but the near annihilation of the Taíno population by the beginning of the seventeenth century and the subsequent mixing of the remnants with Europeans, Africans, and others. The cultural mixtures that have resulted do not justify the privileging of a Taíno identity or pedigree in the contemporary period.

Identities
Mr. Estevez laments the fact that persons who claim a Taíno identity or pedigree may be ridiculed for doing so. But it should be understood that such ridicule may result from a valid understanding that ethnic and cultural purity does not exist in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean or anywhere else. Most Caribbean Latin@s know that they are of mixed background, that Europeans, Africans, Asians, Middle Easterners, and the Indigenous have all contributed to the biological diversity and cultural history of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean in some way, and that ideally, no single group, whether European, African, Indigenous, or whatever, should be privileged with regards to their identity or pedigree. Mr. Estevez also states that “our ancestors have contributed many things that are central to us still to this day,” and that the time has come “to elevate the Taíno to their proper place in history,” but as noted earlier, the influence of the Taíno has been exaggerated out of all proportion to its actual importance. Historically, the Taíno and the indigenous have been used in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean to
marginalize or denigrate Africans and their cultural contributions. As Mr. Estevez knows, all non-white persons in the Dominican Republic by definition are referred to and are asked to identify as some type of Indio or Indian regardless of their skin color and appearance, under the assumption that Dominicans cannot possibly be Black. Yet in the Dominican Republic, there also is the concept articulated in the phrase “Black behind the ears,” which means that regardless of a claimed European, Asian, Middle Eastern, or Indigenous ancestry or pedigree, there is the likelihood of an African ancestry that should not be ignored—a concept that also exists in Puerto Rico in the phrase “¿Tú abuela, donde está? (And your grandmother, where is she?)

At this point, it appears that the effort by Caribbean Latin@s to claim an exclusive European, African or indigenous identity based on biology is floundering badly with predictions that such ethnic exclusivity will not be supported by scientific research in the future. In particular, those persons who claim a privileged Taíno ancestry or pedigree and have taken the admixture test are finding out that the Indigenous component in their genome is quite minor when compared to the European or the African component. These tests, which have been commercialized to an extraordinary degree on the internet and other media, also need to be monitored and their results subjected to a rigorous, scientific peer review process in order to avoid what is already beginning to happen—the deliberate and public distortion of test results. We also need to be reminded of the realities of race and ethnicity in the United States and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and its social construction in the contemporary period. For example, all those who claim an exclusive Taíno identity or pedigree should remember that a Caribbean Latin@ with stereotypical Black African features and tightly coiled hair may indeed have indigenous mtDNA or the Y-chromosome (etc.), but this individual will still be considered Black in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the United States and will be treated or mistreated accordingly.

NOTES
1 These figures assume that fifteen generations of thirty years each are being projected back to the 1580s. This conservative figure can be contrasted to those of other demographers who often calculate a generation at twenty or twenty-five years.
4 In another reference, Pakistanis in general are said to “typically show 30 percent Native American heritage.” See Koerner (2005) and Yang (2007: 37).
6 From <jimrunningfox@aol.com> to <jimrunningfox@aol.com> March 23–24, 2007 (Messages in author’s possession).
7 See Guitar, Ferbel-Azcarate, and Estevez (2006: 61). Guitar, Ferbel-Azcarate, and Forte, the editor of Indigenous Resurgence (see reference) are active supporters of the Taíno revivalist movement among Caribbean Latin@s. A review of Forte’s edited volume is forthcoming.
In my own case, DNA Print Genomics presented me with the percentages, but without reference to the number of generations. The results despite my alleged Amerindian appearance and my "shovel shaped" incisor teeth (an alleged Indian trait) are as follows: 71 percent European, 29 percent African, 0 percent Asian, and 0 percent Native American.

See Bolnick, et al. (2007) and Nixon (2007: 7). It also needs to be emphasized that DNA Print Genomics and other such companies present data for Native Americans in general and not for specific subgroups such as Taínos or Arawaks.

For the earlier version of Maya history, see Morley (1946) and Thompson (1954), among others. Thompson had already predicted a revision of Maya history that would lead to the current interpretation at the time of the publication of the 2nd edition of his book in 1966.

Recent revised interpretations of Maya history include Demarest (2005), Demarest, Rice and Rice (2005), Grube (2008), Gugliota (2007), McKillop (2006), Sharer and Traxler (2005), Simon and Grube (2008), and Webster (2002), among many others. The Sharer and Traxler book is actually a thoroughly rewritten edition of Morley's 1946 publication. Also see the recent publication by Strassler (2008), which focuses on the most important original source for the history of the war between Athens and Sparta.

Ironically, this means that he would reject claims made by advocates of Indigenous survival that Taínos communities still existed in the interior regions of Puerto Rico at the end of the eighteenth century based on census records. See Haslip-Viera (2006: 263, 265-Table 2, 266, 270-notes 18, 19).

Mr. Estevez actually quotes Lovén as stating that “Today, there are no pure Taínos,” and that “the Taínos were a people that long ago became extinct.” It should be noted at this point that persons who claim an exclusive Taíno identity or pedigree are quite vague or tend to ignore the issue of what constitutes a Taíno or Amerindian by definition. When pressed to respond to this issue, they tend to acknowledge the fact of their mixed ancestry, but they soon revert to their claims for an exclusive and privileged Taíno or Amerindian identity. At times, they also claim that the issue of mixture is unimportant or irrelevant. See for example the comments made by Mr. Estevez and Cacike Coqui in response to the concerns articulated by Elder Jim Runningfox in <jimrunningfox@aol.com> to <jimrunningfox@aol.com> March 23–24, 2007 (Messages in author’s possession). The issue of what constitutes a Native American has also become controversial and contentious in U.S. society in recent years. See Nagel (1995). Also see Koerner (2005) for the specific connection between race, genetics, and the expulsion of subgroups among the Cherokees and Seminoles, especially the expulsion of those who conform to the physical stereotype of the Black African.

Michael W. Harrington is probably M.R. Harrington, who wrote Cuba Before Columbus, a book that contains pictures of “Cubans of Indian Extraction...” and “Yateras” Indians. However, as noted by Schmidt-Nowara (2006: 111), “the skeptical viewer would be hard-pressed to admit any difference between these mestizos and the other Cubans photographed in Harrington’s study.”

It should be noted that General George W. Davis assisted in the near extinction of Native Americans in the western United States, serving for periods of time in Arizona, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Utah, and Kansas from the late 1860s to the late 1890s.

In actuality, a firm historical tradition for Indigenous survival seems to exist only in eastern Cuba, but even here, it is limited to a number of specific extended families and networks, who are nevertheless of mixed background by their own admission. See Barreiro (2006).
In support of Guitar, Estevez also utilizes the quote from Steiner (1974: 17).


See the relevant sections in Wilson (1990), and Hemming (1995a, 1995b).


In Puerto Rico, see quite a number of organized archaeological sites, exhibits in museums, and museums and other institutions devoted to the pre-Columbian Taíno and their legacy, but only one museum devoted to the African experience—El Museo de Nuestra Raíz Africana. This museum was established in 1999 by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Prior to this date, there were no official institutions in Puerto Rico devoted to this legacy.


The categories that are used include Indio lavado, Indio claro, Indio oscuro, Indio quemado, and Indio canelo (washed, light, dark, burnt, and cinnamon colored Indian, etc.). See Candelario (2007: 5, 16–20, 24, 25, 27, 28–9, 31 and passim), and Sagas (2000: 76, 130–1). Also see Roberts (2000), whose research focuses on the entire Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

The crass commercialization and the exaggerated claims made for this kind of research have been debated and roundly criticized in recent years by a number of scientists and social scientists. See for example Duster (nd.), Brown (2002), Elliott and Brodwin (2002), Weiss and Fullerton (2005), Cabrera Salcedo (2006), Brusi-Gil de Lamadrid and Godreau (2007), Bolnick, et al. (2007), Yang (2007), and Nixon (2007), among others. The article recently published by Wang, et al. (2008) is one of the first to insure that research based on admixture testing is subjected to a rigorous peer review process.

As explained in my article, see Haslip-Viera (2006: 262).

REFERENCES


