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Searching for the long-lost 'Indios' in Cuba's cultural-genetic amalgam

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Abstract

This paper discusses old and new ideas about the origins and migration routes of Cuba's pre-Columbian inhabitants as well as their fate after European contact. The deep-rooted and widespread notion that the Indocubans and their culture were obliterated by disease, mistreat, and the overwhelming influx of European settlers and African slaves is shown to be fallacious on the basis of surviving ethnohistorical data, official documents, and recent DNA research.

Keywords: Cuba, pre-Columbian migrations, post-contact settlement, Indocuban survivals

11.1 Introduction

Seventy years ago, one of the authors (MN) asked his Cuban 4th-grade teacher 'where did our Indians come from?' The answer, 'from Venezuela hopping

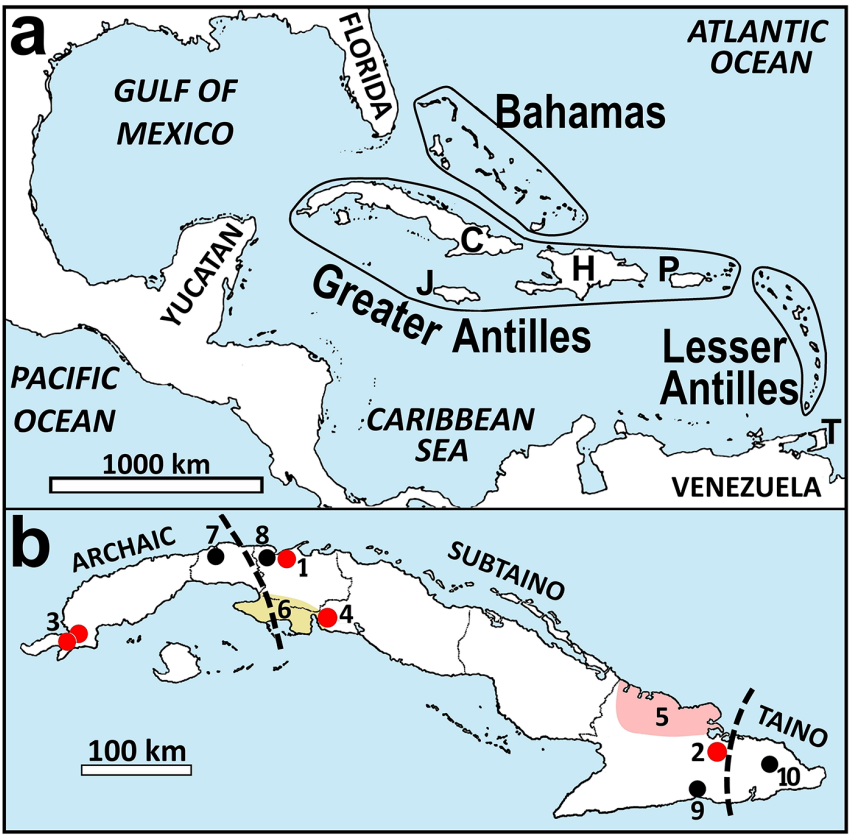

Figure 1. Cuba and the Gulf-Caribbean Basin. A – the West Indies comprising small low-lying coralliferous islands surrounded by shallow banks in the Bahamas, large islands with both mountains and plains in the Greater Antilles, and small volcanic islands generally high and close enough to be visible from their neighbours in the Lesser Antilles; Islands mentioned in the text: C) Cuba; J) Jamaica; H) Hispaniola; P) Puerto Rico; T) Trinidad. B – Cuba with places mentioned in the text: 1) Canímar Abajo, c 7300 calBP; 2) Levisa, c 5900 calBP; 3) Cueva Funche, c 4500 calBP, and Cayo Redondo; 4) Guayabo Blanco; 5) Maniabón Hills; 6) Zapata swamps; 7–10) respectively Habana, Matanzas, Santiago and Yateras. The dotted lines denote the approximate boundaries of the territories occupied by Archaic, Subtaíno and Taíno cultures in 1492 according to Rouse (1992).

from island to island', seemed strange since Florida was much closer. The issue remerged 30 years later, when he was exposed to Caribbean prehistory at Calgary University. Fascinated, he tried to change his thesis topic. Since it was not possible, he had to be content with writing a term paper *On the origins of the Cuban aceramic cultures* (1981). Two professors urged him to publish, and he finally did in *Suomen Museo* 1986 (Núñez 1986). Whether due to poor quality, journal obscurity or both, the article has never been cited. Nevertheless, since some of the 40-year-old ideas have been vindicated by recent research, it seems fitting that a retired archaeology professor and a young maritime archaeologist join forces to delve into the subject to celebrate a dear colleague's 60th birthday.

11.2 Background

The West Indies form a 3000-km island chain stretching from Trinidad off the Venezuelan coast to Cuba and the westernmost Bahamas near Florida and Yucatán (Fig. 1). The islands can be sorted into three groups: the Bahamas farthest northwest, the Lesser Antilles farthest southeast, and the Greater Antilles, including Cuba, between them. Island sizes have varied through time due to glaciation-related fluctuating ocean levels, which rose to reach current shorelines c 6000 calBP.

Through millennia each of the 100+ islands have received genetic and cultural contributions from neighbour islands, the surrounding mainland – even other continents after 1492. All have impacted differentially each island, leading to the colourful cultural and genetic mosaic of today's West Indies. Each island owns a unique past that is somewhat parallel to those of the other islands. Here we focus on the history of Cuba's demographic melting pot.

11.3 Before Columbus

An exciting and debated question in Cuban Archaeology is that of origins. Given her situation at the northwest end of the West Indian chain, Cuba is likely to have been among the first or the last to be populated. Answers were first sought in the early chronicles and later in linguistic and/or artefact analogies between the islands and the surrounding mainland. Accordingly, the homeland of the first Cubans has been placed alternatively in South, Central and North America (Fig. 2a). Recently, several techniques, including aDNA analyses, have been applied.

Early chroniclers were not interested in the origins of the peoples they found in the Indies, though curiosity about which 'Lost Tribe' they may belong to arose after the Americas were shown to be a new continent in the early 1500s. In the 1550s Bartolomé de las Casas, who participated in Cuba's conquest, distinguished six different indigenous groups in the West Indies:

1. Guanahatabey, primitive foragers of westernmost Cuba
2. Lucayo, maritime-oriented people of the Bahamas
3. A nameless fishing folk of Cuba's coastal cays
4. Ciboney, seemingly farming folk las Casas calls the Indians of Cuba
5. Nameless more complex newcomers from Hispaniola with authority over the Ciboney
6. Carib, dreaded Lesser-Antilles folk who raided the east Greater Antilles

The cave-dwelling Guanahatabey were mentioned in letters to the king by Diego Velázquez in 1514 and las Casas in 1516. Las Casas regarded Groups 2–4 as about the same people. The Ciboney, a name only used by las Casas, were supposedly subjugated by Group 5, which had come from Hispaniola some decades before Columbus. Groups 2–5 spoke mutually intelligible dialects/languages (or a lingua franca), but apparently Group 1 did not. Group 5 was baptized 'Taíno' by Antonio Bachiller Morales (1883).

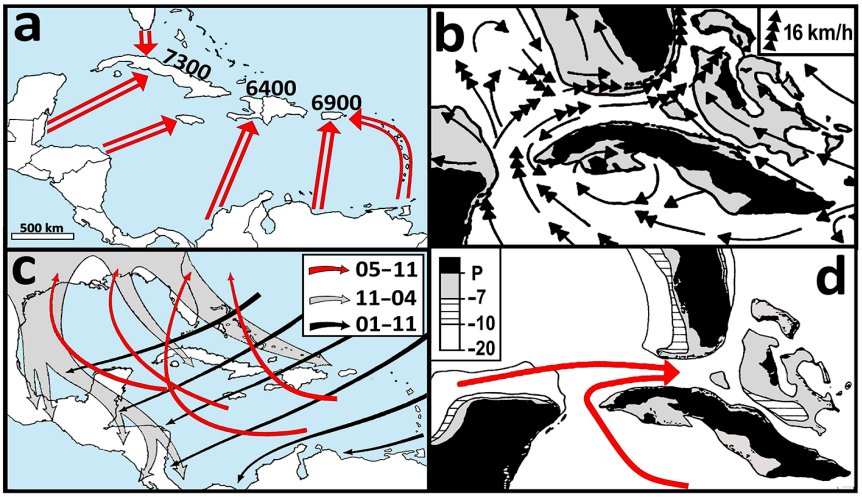

Figure 2. Maps related to preceramic population movements to Cuba: A – migration routes suggested by different researchers and earliest Archaic calBP dates of Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, which predate those of other islands by at least 1500 years; B – current path and speed (4–16 km/h) of sea currents, which were probably about the same by 7000 calBC, with continental/insular platforms in gray; C – predominant paths and active months of trade winds, artic fronts and tropical storms/hurricanes; D – dryland and shorelines of Cuba, the Bahamas and nearby mainland today (P), and around 7, 10 and 20 ky calBP. A canoe from anywhere in the Gulf-Caribbean shores may have, aided by tropical storms (C) and/or the 16-km/h Florida Current (B), reached intentionally/accidentally Cuba via the exposed Bahaman landmass (D) 7000–8000 years ago. Sources: B Wust 1964 (B); Marrero 1978 (C).

When Cuban national identity emerged in the 1800s, criollos revived las Casas' statement about the Ciboney being Cuba's natives. Soon the Ciboney became a noble savage admired by Cuban poets and historians – what is known as *siboneismo*. In Europe the question of West Indians' origins led to numerous theories linking them not only to South, Central or North America, but also the Canaries, Egypt, Cartago, even Atlantis. Specifically concerning Cuba was Dresdener Franz Kruger's claim that it was Plutarch's Ogygia.

Inspired by *siboneismo* and 'thunder-stone' finds, Cuban antiquarians began probing pre-Columbian sites in the mid-1800s. They held varying views. Most saw the Ciboney as Cuba's primary inhabitants with the possible presence of most of las Casas' Indian groups (1, 3, 5, 6), but there was less consensus about origins. According to Pedro Guiteras (1855: 85) Cuba's Ciboney '*knew their ancestors had migrated from Florida*'. Andrés Poey (1863) and Bachiller Morales (1883) linked them to South America. There was even the theory of primitive *Homo cubensis* trekking to mainland-connected Cuba during the Pliocene!

Nevertheless, Daniel Brinton (1898: 256) stated 'archaeology has not been wholly neglected by intelligent Cubans, although it is true that there has been little serious investigation'. Similarly, Fernando Ortiz (1922) wrote that Cuban-conducted archaeological exploration had been sporadic and unfunded, and that most investigations were done by foreign researchers. Those foreigners, especially US-born Jesse Walter Fewkes and Mark Harrington, would provide a basic framework for Cuban Archaeology.

Fewkes (1904), based on previous work and his own, saw two culture groups: cave-dwelling foragers that had first occupied the whole island and may have survived in western Cuba until 1492, and the pot-making village-dwelling agriculturalists met by Columbus. The latter he identified with the 'Tainan or Antillean culture' of Hispaniola. He traced them to South America, but left open the cave dwellers' source with a veiled hint to Florida:

> There was considerable likeness in culture between the inhabitants of the keys of Florida and those of the Cuban coast and the small adjacent islands, due either to early contact of these two peoples or to migration from one to the other locality in limited numbers. (Fewkes 1904: 596).

Cuba's engineer-turned-archaeologist Juan Antonio Cosculluela (1918) conducted fieldwork in the Zapata swamps, discovering 'kiokenmondingos', palafittes and the Guayabo Blanco burials. He believed that 'Paleolithic' Ciboney had arrived 6000–12,000 years ago and spread over the island. He

placed them throughout Cuba in the 15th century, with Taíno in the east and Carib enclaves in the south coast, all three groups from South America. Cosculluela's Ciboney were foragers, contrasting with the long-established notion of them being farmers.

Cosculluela's book must have appealed to Harrington, not only for the important Zapata finds but also for the numerous photographs and descriptions of the environment, people and folklore of the swamps. He translated several pages in his own book and, like Cosculluela, applied the term Ciboney to Cuba's Archaic.

> Considering first the primitive culture, we find that archeology can trace it from one end of the island to the other, with but little local variation, frequently in caves, associated in places with the extinct Megalocnus, and underlying other human deposits. It is evident that the people possessing this culture might well be called the original natives of Cuba; but where can we find a name for them? Las Casas supplies the deficiency by informing us that the original inhabitants, the same who were subjugated and converted into servants by the [Taíno] invaders were called 'Ciboneyes'. (Harrington 1921: 409–410).

Harrington's association of 'Ciboney' with Cuba's foragers was influenced by Cosculluela and Brinton's interpretation of the term Ciboney as *siba*, rock, and *eyeri*, man. 'The name Ciboney was applied to them by the Taino, and seems to mean "rock-men", an appropriate term for cave-dwellers' (Harrington 1921: 412). He also indicated that since the Taíno practiced cranial deformation, flattened skulls were not evidence of Carib presence in Cuba.

Harrington's book stimulated and served as guide to Cuban archaeologists, particularly after its Spanish translation in 1935. Ortiz (1922) praised Harrington's clear and succinct scheme. Sven Lovén (1924) adopted Harrington's foraging-Ciboney and farming-Taíno division, albeit as Guanahatabey and Inselaruaken.

Harrington's ideas were also embraced by Cornelius Osgood and Irving Rouse. Osgood excavated a non-pottery site on Cayo Redondo in a mangrove swamp of westernmost Cuba, labelling it Ciboney. Regarding origins he stated: 'The consensus of present opinion points to the North American mainland as the country from which the Ciboney came, but this is as yet inadequately supported by hypothesis' (Osgood 1942: 57).

Rouse (1942) surveyed the Maniabón Hills of Cuba's easternmost province, calling non-pottery sites Ciboney and pottery ones Subtaíno. He suggested a three-culture scheme: Ciboney with two aspects (older Guayabo Blanco, younger Cayo Redondo), Subtaíno and Taíno. Subsequently, Cuban archaeologists distinguished these cultural manifestations but assigned them different names. Rouse did not address the source of Cuba's Archaic, but suggested alternatingly Florida, Yucatán and/or Venezuela in later publications.

When MN wrote his term paper in 1981, Taíno origins were univocally sought somewhere in South America whereas opinions about the homeland(s) of Cuba's preceramic varied (Fig. 2a). Research had uncovered lithic sites in the north of Cuba's easternmost province, including the c 5900 calBP Levisa shelter (Tabío Palma et al. 1978). Since this date was close to when Caribbean continental/insular platforms were partially exposed, he suggested that preceramic pioneers from anywhere in the Gulf-Caribbean shores may have reached Cuba directly or, particularly, via the expanded Bahaman landmass before 7000 calBP (Fig. 2b–d). A canoeing genetically viable group(s) could have used storms and the Florida Current to reach the Bahaman landmass. A new date of c 7300 calBP from Matanzas's north coast (Roksandik et al. 2015) enhances such possibilities.

In 1992 Rouse postulated that preceramic peoples had reached the Greater Antilles from both Yucatán and South America. By then there were alternative interpretations and subsequent research has shown that pre-Columbian West Indians were much more mobile than previously thought, which is not surprising when one thinks that, instead of isolator, the sea is a powerful connector.

Recent aDNA analyses by Fernandes et al. (2020) of 174 preceramic and ceramic skeletons from sites throughout the Caribbean region, including seven Cuban preceramic samples, suggest that:

- Archaic-linked individuals are more closely related to Central and South America and are consistent with a single source, which does not support extra North American migrations.
- Archaic ancestry was >98% replaced by Ceramic-linked ancestry in most Greater Antilles but persisted with minimal admixture in Cuba over 2500 years.
- Most Ceramic individuals are genetically homogeneous and are connected to northeast South America.
- Genetic homogeneity across ceramic styles does not support multiple migration waves of genetically different people from South America.
- Significant Archaic-Ceramic admixture was extremely rare.
- Unmixed Archaic-related ancestry persisted in Cuba to the 13th century but was replaced by Ceramic-related ancestry in Hispaniola at least 1000 years earlier.

Although the results seem to exclude a North American source, the high proportion of haplogroup A2 in today's Cubans suggests a Central and/or North American Archaic migration. Much more complex population movements would affect Cuba after European contact.

11.4 Postcontact

After exploring Cuba's northeast coast, Columbus sailed to Hispaniola, where he left 39 men before leaving for Europe in January 1493. Their excesses got them killed, but Columbus returned ten months later with 15 ships and 1200

men. They concentrated in securing Hispaniola and, aside from sporadic clandestine slave raids, Cuba was left in peace.

Finally, 300 conquistadors arrived in eastern Cuba in 1510, completing their task in 1514. By 1515 seven towns had been founded across the island, which attracted many settlers. By 1517 it was becoming difficult to assign Indians to newcomers, prompting slave raids to the Bahamas and several mainland shores. In 1516 las Casas wrote to the king, asking to ease the natives' burden with African slaves. In addition to those already brought from Spain by settlers, 300 African slaves were imported in 1523. By then Cuba's population was dropping. Many natives had succumbed to disease and mistreat, others had fled to inaccessible mountains, swamps and cays. Furthermore, over 700 settlers had left after Mexico's gold. Population reached bottom in the 1540s, when the towns register about 1500 settlers, 1100 natives and 700 slaves. Most settlers were from Andalucía (c 30%) and Castille (c 25%) but all provinces were represented. There were also foreigners (c 8%), mainly from territories linked to Spanish monarchs like Portugal, Italy, Netherlands and Germany – among them, Nuremberger Johannes Tetzel, who introduced copper mining near Santiago (Marrero 1978).

Indocubans were liberated from their serf-like obligations in the 1550s. They were gradually forgotten while African slave numbers increased exponentially. During 1511–1867 over a million slaves were imported: 1511–1540 c 700, 1540–1560 c 60,000, 1760–1800 c 93,000, 1800–1867 c 724,000. Many more were smuggled in. By 1840 there were c 418,300 whites, c 152,800 free persons of colour and c 436,500 slaves in Cuba. As slave trade dwindled in the 1840s, Cuban landowners resorted to indentured labor. During 1847–1875, c 4000 Yucatecans and c 125,000 Chinese were lured to Cuba. Most stayed (López Valdés 1986; López 2013).

Another important group were the Canary islanders, who participated in Cuba's conquest in 1511 and maintained presence on the island. About 30,000 migrated to Cuba in the 17th century, and the town of Matanzas was founded by 30 Canarian families in 1693 (Bretos 2010). The 1863 census

shows that the proportion of Canarians was much higher than that of other Spanish provinces. The Canarian influx, which continued into the 20th century, carried the pure Moroccan-Berber genes of the Guanche (Maca-Meyer et al. 2004), who had arrived in the Canaries two millennia before the Europeans.

Other important ethnic elements came from Latin and North America. US capital was involved in sugar, coffee and mining, engaging thousands of American operators/merchants. Europeans were represented too. For example, the 19th-century Matanzas elite included Marburger naturalist Johannes Gundlach, Düsseldorfer Ferdinand Heydrich, the city's aqueduct builder, with his Spanish wife and six Cuban-born children, the German Uhrbachs, English Drakes, Irish Madans, Italian Yarinis, American Schweyers, Venezuelan Montes, Colombian Tancos and several Cuban-Spanish families. Thousands of sporadic visitors, some famous, would bring new genes/ideas through the centuries: some unwanted like privateer Henry Morgan, others inspiring like baron von Humboldt, Austrian Fanny Elssler, Finnish Fredrika Bremer – not to mention the flow of ever-welcomed tourists. (Bretos 2010)

In addition to traditional immigrant sources, the new 20th-century Cuban Republic received about 300,000 labourers from neighbouring Haiti and Jamaica and thousands of enterprising Christian Arabs. Jewish immigrants also arrived by the thousands, first Sephardim from Turkey and then Ashkenazim from Europe. They did not marry locals and most eventually emigrated to US/Israel after World War II, but c 15,000 Jews were still living in Cuba in 1953.

According to the 1899 census Cuba had 1,572,797 inhabitants of which 67% were white and 33% coloured (17% mixed, 15% black, 1% Chinese). By 1953 the population had increased to c 5,800,000, 72.8% white and 27.2% coloured (14.5% mixed, 12.4% black, 0.3% Chinese). After 1959 there was a significant diaspora of mainly white upper/middle-class members, but by 2012 Cuba's population had doubled to over 11 million (64.1% white, 26.6% mixed, 9.3% black).

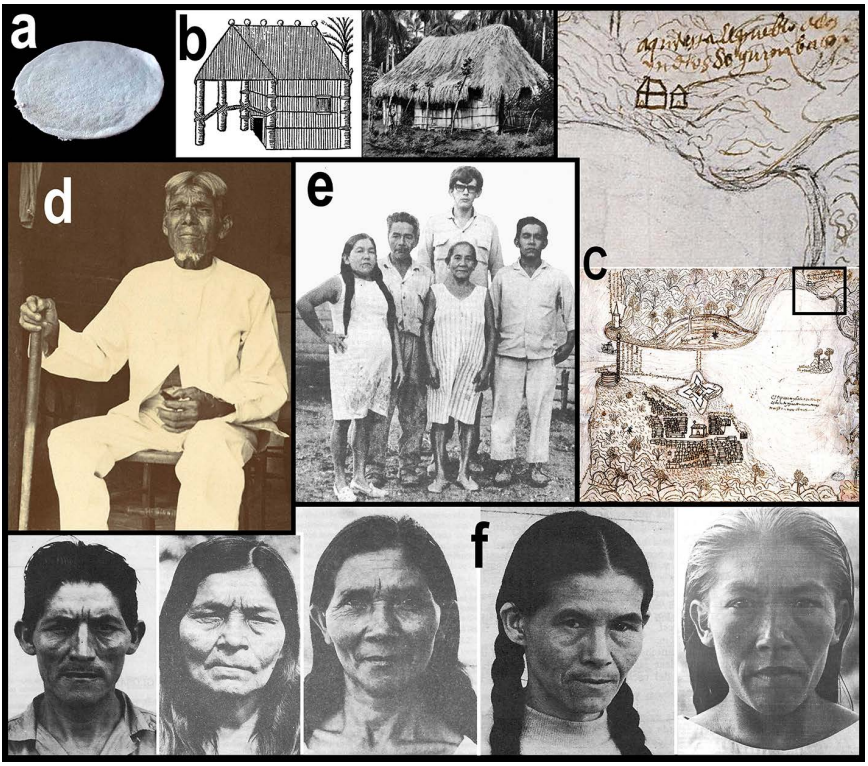

Figure 3. Postcontact Indocuban survivals: A – casabe (manioc bread), also known as 'pan de indios', is still made in the old Taíno fashion in the mountains of eastern Cuba; B – Taíno dwelling sketched in 1535 and a typical 'bohío' home of the Cuban countryside in 1930s; C – 1567 map showing fortified Habana and across the bay, in the marked rectangle (closeup above) houses labeled 'Here is the town of the Indians of Guanabacoa'. Indocuban artisans still lived there in the mid-19th century, when it was no longer an 'Indian town'; D–F – individuals with Indocuban phenotype from the mountains of easternmost Cuba. In addition to the facial features, 112-year-old José Almenares Argüello (D) and the noticeable height difference between anthropologist Tejedor Álvarez and the Rojas family (E) testify to the longevity and low stature attributed to Indocuban descendants. Sources: Wikimedia Commons (A, B), Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo 1535 (B); Archivo General de Indias (C); Culin 1902 (D); Manuel Rivero de la Calle 1970s (E, F).

11.5 And the Indocubans?

One striking feature of these population statistics is the absence of Indocubans. The 1826 Spanish *Diccionario de Hacienda* declares that all Cuban Indians had perished. Yet, while siboneists were mourning the demise of the noble naked Ciboney, documents show a vigorous 19th century presence of their, albeit clothed and acculturated, descendants (Pichardo Moya 1945; Martínez Fuentes et al. 2014). Some still lived in villages (*pueblos indios*) created after their ancestors' emancipation in the 1550s (Fig. 3c). Many more, distrusting the settlers, had stayed in remote mountains and swamps, mixing through the centuries with runaway slaves and outlaws, and eventually becoming assimilated into Cuba's rural population, the Guajiros.

Felipe Pichardo Moya's (1945: 3) explanation for the Indocubans' absence from Cuban history pages is that 'the Indian was not an element of the society the historians were writing about'. Indeed, since the Indocubans's role in 'progressive' modern Cuba was seemingly nil, they were simply left out and, thus, condemned to oblivion. The process bears similarities to the exclusion of the Saami from Finnish prehistory and history (Núñez 2011).

Evidently, historians overlooked/ignored many official documents showing the steady presence of a resilient Indocuban minority in 17th-through-19th-century Cuba. Pichardo Moya lists numerous documents describing Indians in: Baptismal records; militias for defense against pirates; Indian villages near settlement areas; farm raids by '*indios bravos*' from the mountains; land litigations won with proof of Indian descent undiluted by inferior races; and combating Spain in the secession wars (1868–1878, 1895–1898).

The Indocuban descendants of Cuba's remote eastern mountains were first reported by Miguel Rodríguez-Ferrer in 1847 and studied by Bremen-born ethnologist Adolf Bastian in 1879. In 1892 Luis Montané measured other Indocubans, including centenarian José Almenares Argüello (Fig. 3d) from El Caney, near Santiago (Martínez Fuentes et al. 2014). Stewart Culin (1902: 191–192), who interviewed him 9 years later, describes him as very healthy and alert for his 112 years, adding that in Almenares' youth there were many

Taino	English	German	Finnish
ananás	ananas	Ananas	ananas
batata	potato	Batate	bataatti
canoa	canoe	Kanu	kanootti
cariba/caniba	cannibal	Kannibale	kannibaali
huracán	hurricane	Hurrikan	hurrikaani
iguana	iguana	Leguan	leguaani
maís/majisi	maize	Mais	maissi
papaya	papaya	Papaya	papaija
zabana	savanna	Savanne	savanni
tabaco	tobacco	Tabak	tupakka

Table 1. Some worldwide Taíno loanwords.

Indians living as 'free people wearing the same dress as their neighbours and talking Spanish'. Cosculluela (1918) also met people with Indocuban features who had never left the Zapata swamps. One family still made Taíno-style *casabe* (manioc bread) and said that their longevous late grandfather had been cacique. The bearers of Indocuban phenotype (Fig. 3d–f) are not pure Taíno descendants, their traits have been preserved and enhanced through endogamy in isolated areas.

11.6 Epilogue

The European conquest may have obliterated the Indocubans' lifeways and culture and all but replaced their phenotype through mestizage, but they are not gone. Some of their customs endured (Fig. 3a–b) and many of their words survived in Cuban Spanish and, to a lesser extent, other languages (Table 1). Moreover, mtDNA analyses revealed that c 33% of today's Cubans bear Native-American lineages (Mendizábal et al. 2008).

Cuba has been a true melting pot of genes and cultures for millennia. In addition to different Indocuban groups, there were Spanish settlers of Iberian, Phoenician/Cartaginean, Greek, Roman, Gothic, North-African/Guanche ancestry as well as peoples from Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia. Since the newcomers were predominantly male, mestizage through loose and formal unions was rife. Marriages between Europeans and Indocuban women were common. The prime concocter of Cuba's cultural-genetic soup was her insularity. Islands function as hubs in maritime networks and Cuba has been a central one indeed. All these and more were responsible for forming the Cuban nation with its multifaceted culture and gene pool.

Acknowledgements

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