

WHY TAINO DAY?



By

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In 2004, during the Haitian Bicentennial, the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT) discussed the possibility of replacing the contested “Encounter Day”, an annual commemorative event on the organisation’s calendar usually held on May 5 to mark the meeting of the cultures, with the equally contentious “Taino Day”. Actually, my preference as a historian was for “Indigenous Peoples’ Day,” in order to be more inclusive of the civilizations which existed in the island before the invasion by the Europeans. The Board chose Taino Day, however, in order to avoid the still controversial matter of whether or not the Maroons are to be categorised as “indigenous peoples”.

While not everyone from the JNHT Board or within the organisation, or indeed at the Ministry of Tourism, Entertainment and Culture (the parent Ministry at the time), was supportive of the change to “Taino Day”, everyone put their organisational weight behind the very first “Taino Day” in 2007 - the year when Jamaica marked the bicentennial of

the passing of the “British Slave Trade Abolition Act,” simply because that Act continued the process (however slowly), of dismantling the trade in Africans and slavery.

The first Taino Day was a historic occasion, with the participation of two members from the Kalinago (“Carib”) community in Dominica (who were then students at the Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies and who were sponsored by that campus). Our guest lecturer was Professor Rita Pemberton from the St. Augustine, Trinidad, History Department and there were in attendance hundreds of visitors and students from schools around the island. Those who could not attend were kept abreast of the day’s excitement by IRIE FM. The JNHT has since continued to mark Taino in some shape or form ever since.

The switch

On this the third anniversary of Taino Day, it is perhaps timely to rehearse the reasons for the switch from ‘Encounter Day’; and I have been asked to provide that rehearsal because, I guess, I was the chief instigator! The first reason was to celebrate publicly the lives of the early Jamaicans, who often get left out of annual cultural celebrations and who have no major monument to mark their presence (despite an attempt by the Jamaica Historical Society to raise money for one to face down Columbus in St Ann in 1994).

The second reason was to cement the idea firmly in the consciousness of youngsters that people were living in the Caribbean before Columbus’s invasion of the region. We also wanted to teach students and the general public about the reasons that the

Taino civilization (conservatively estimated to number 60,000 to 1 million people in 1494), disappeared by 1655, surviving only in the culture of the Maroons; about the Spanish atrocities against the indigenous peoples and about genocide.

‘Encounter Day’ was supposed to acknowledge/mark/re-enact/recount the ‘meeting’ of several cultures at Seville. But ‘Encounter’ seemed to us too mild a term to describe what happened when Europeans clashed with indigenous peoples and then later went on to interact with Africans and Asians. “Encounter” seemed too romantic an image; too sanitized a version of Jamaica’s history, masking the realities of barbarity, cruelty, rape, genocide, slavery, sexism, racism and ethnocentrism.

Another problem with ‘Encounter Day’ from the perspective of those of us who supported the change was that its focus was mostly on how the so-called ‘meeting of cultures’ changed the lives of those who met each other and the future of the island of Jamaica, more generally stressing the ‘Out of Many People’ motto. In our view, this emphasis on several cultures at the same time did not allow for a proper focus on the rich culture - the lives and experiences of those who existed in that space before 1492.

We wanted to give adequate space to the exploration of Taino dress as captured by Morales Padrón and archaeologists: their feathered head-dresses; their chests and bellies covered with palm leaves; the bling, bling of the chiefs as captured in early texts. Padrón, e.g. recounts: *“the cacique wore a bronze jewel, so delicate that it seemed like 8-karat gold... as large as a dish, attached to his neck by a string of thick beads of marble stone; and on his head he wore a diadem of small green and red stones; and he also had a jewel hanging over his forehead and from his ears dangled two large plaques of gold”*. We wanted to introduce Jamaicans to Taino, their knowledge of the rest of the

Caribbean; their regionalism; their belief system; their economic, social and political systems. The idea then, that our history should always be determined by what happened after the European colonization was unpalatable to some of us.

Yet another rationale for questioning 'Encounter Day' was the timing of its introduction - from what historian Barry Higman has recounted: during the Quincentenary or 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Americas. Between 1992 and 1994, some people were observing the so-called 'cultural enrichment' that followed the 'meeting' of Europe and Jamaica and later of Africa; and to elevate the Seville Heritage site to a position of a site that represented a place of Spanish colonization. Several members of the Board at the time felt uncomfortable with our premier Heritage Site being important because of that particular reason. We felt it was far better for Seville to be celebrated as a site of Taino settlement and Taino and African resistance to systems of domination.

Some members of the JNHT Board were conscious of the public distaste for the celebration of the Quincentenary, based on the historical account captured by Higman in his book, *Writing West Indian Histories*. Higman tells us that some artists in Jamaica refused to include their works in the Quincentenary exhibition planned for Seville Heritage Park; and a Quincentenary poster with Columbus and his ships sailing above a picture of a guitar-playing Rasta resembling Marley, and of the Lion of Judah, had to be withdrawn because of opposition from some Rastafarians.

Some of us knew about the fact that survivors of the indigenous holocaust in other Caribbean territories demonstrated their opposition. In Guyana, people wore black arm bands and threw flowers in the sea in a symbolic ritual of mourning. In Dominica, posters

on the streets of Rosseau in January 1993, invited people to attend at the parish hall, the trial of Don Cristóbal Colón on charges of rape, murder, libel, extortion and enslavement. In St Lucia, it was proposed that a square named Columbus Square in 1893 be renamed Kalinago Square

The National Quincentenary Commission in Jamaica, however, engaged in no such radical thinking but instead settled on a mild and euphemistic ‘Encounter Day’ (Of course, those who pressed for ‘Encounter Day’ may well have considered this ‘radical’ and an alternative to ‘Columbus Day’). To make matters worse, from what we read, they launched National Heritage Week at Columbus Park in Discovery Bay on 12th October 1992. What an insult to the people of Jamaica! No wonder the UNIA objected, with Marcus Garvey Jnr. declaring that day African holocaust day in memory of the victims of the trade in Africans that began as a direct consequence of Columbus’ landing in our region. In some Latin American countries people wore t-shirts with “Se Busca a Cristóbal Colón.” When 1994 actually rolled around, the general public disinterest and the outcry against any recognition of the Quincentenary caused the National Quincentenary Commission to scale down its events and focus on the experiences of the indigenous people. In that year, perhaps in defiance, Taino was unveiled by the archaeologists at the JNHT to the public who were told to henceforth stop saying Arawak. Clearly the JNHT was already moving towards a restoration of the Taino!!!

The JNHT is staffed by heritage workers and historians engaged in constructing a history of the present. A history of the present requires asking new questions of past acts and adjusting our present accordingly. The JNHT must be a leader and shaper of public opinion and the JNHT of 2004-2007 could not rest easy as descendants of Tainos,

Maroons and other Africans and follow that 'lie-centenary' - to borrow a term coined by David Neita to describe the 2007 bicentennial..

So, by introducing Taino Day and (hopefully) parking 'Encounter Day', (although there are no doubt those who would wish to resurrect it), Seville Heritage Park is, perhaps, being re-interpreted, fulfilling the wishes of Jamaicans and Caribbean people who in 1992 and 1994 said no to any celebration of Columbus and the type of globalization that his landing sparked. Some Jamaicans may very well have been crying out since 1992 for Taino Day as part of the completion of the project of iconographic and iconic declonization. So here it is courtesy of the JNHT.

(Professor Verene Shepherd is a former chair of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust under whose leadership the first Taino Day was commemorated.)