

The International Day of the World's Indigenous People - The Legacies of the Taino

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Indigenous peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. In Jamaica's case, the first known inhabitants of the island were the Taino, a people descended from those who first crossed the Bering Strait into the Americas thousands of years ago.

It is believed that humans have inhabited Jamaica from as early as 4,000 - 2,000 B.C. We were taught that the first inhabitants of the island were the Taino who were believed to have descended from Arawakan speakers who entered the Caribbean from South America around 500 A.D. The Taino practised agriculture and fishing and lived a sedentary life in villages of about two hundred persons, which were led by a Cacique and spread throughout the island, the south coast being the most heavily populated. Since these early inhabitants of the region did not have a written language, we can only rely on the various European accounts as well as archaeological evidence to know and understand them.

The Arrival of the Europeans

The arrival of Europeans to the region, starting with Columbus' initial voyage in 1492, signalled the end of life as the indigenous knew it; the population of Jamaica, in particular, was decimated within a matter of decades. There were two factors that contributed to this. The first was the diseases that the Spanish brought with them (including smallpox and influenza). The Taino people had never before been exposed to these diseases and so had no

prior immunity to them. Secondly, those who were not killed by diseases were worked to death under the Encomienda System, a system of forced labour introduced by the Spanish conquistadors that was akin to slavery in all but name. Even with the destruction of the Taino people and their way of life, some aspects of their culture were still retained and were passed on to the Africans who were brought in by the Spanish to supplement their dwindling labour force. These Africans later fled Spanish plantations to nearby hills and became known as the Maroons, who became the custodians of Taino knowledge.

Taino Influence

The designation of August 9 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is meant to celebrate the contributions of a nation's first inhabitants to its cultural development and to pass on their unique practices throughout generations. Even though Jamaica's indigenous people no longer make up a significant part of our population, there are parts of the island's culture that can be attributed to Taino influence. There are aspects of their way of life which are still present today.

Taino Foods

Many of the fruits and vegetables that we enjoy today were once also enjoyed by the Taino people who cultivated them mainly for subsistence purposes. Some of these include pineapples, star apples, naseberries, guavas, cashews, sweet potatoes, ground nuts and peanuts.

Cassava was a staple of the Taino diet that has translated into a staple of the Jamaican diet, particularly in the form of bammy. Bammy, as we know it today, is a bit different from the 'cassava bread' of the Taino. A primary root crop that was cultivated by the Taino, cassava

could have been eaten in various ways, one of which was to remove the juice from cut-up cassava pieces and shape the trash into a slab, like bread, then bake into a flat cassava bread. Another dish that was attributed to Taino influence is Pepperpot Soup, a hearty soup/stew filled with vegetable and meat. Today, we cook it with callaloo, salted meats and ground provisions, and it is a staple dish on any given Saturday.

Jerk Cooking

Whether you prefer jerk chicken, jerk pork, rabbit or fish, we can not deny that jerk is a staple Jamaican culinary skill, but did you know that it was inspired by the Tainos?

The jerk cooking method began when escaped African slaves, known as Maroons, fled to the mountains of Jamaica's Cockpit Country where they cooked the meat of wild hogs by first preserving them in a marinade of Taino and African-inspired seasonings. Then they buried the meat in the earth to temper the scent and smoke to prevent them from getting caught.

It was customary for the Taino people to cook on a grill known as a 'barbacoa' (which means heated sticks) made from pimento wood. The meat was seasoned and cooked over a low fire in order to preserve it for long journeys. Jerk is a Jamaican cooking tradition conceived as a product of hardship and resistance and is a remnant of Jamaica's Maroon and Taino cultures.

Although the Taino no longer constitute a prominent part of Jamaica's population, their mark on our culture cannot be denied, as evident in the foods we consume which were enjoyed by the Taino people as well as our jerk cooking method once practised by the Taino. Jamaica's motto, "Out of Many, One People", is a perfect reminder of the various peoples and traditions that make up the cultural fabric of our nation.



Jamaican jerk pork prepared in a similar method to that used by the Taino (Photo credit: Dave Lindo, Gleaner writer)

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