Caribbean Encounters with the World

European conquest of the Caribbean changed the world. Contact between Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia increased after colonization. The Columbian Exchange (named after Christopher Columbus) was the transfer of plants, animals, culture, human population, technology, and ideas between the Americas and across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Making Connections: Foods were not the only items exchanged between the Americas and the rest of the world. Taíno peoples played a ball game called bati in which players hit a rubber ball with their hips, elbows, shoulders, or head. The Spanish had never seen rubber and took some back to Europe with them.

Bati is still played today in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. What other sports played today use a rubber ball? Can you think of anything else we use that is made from rubber?

Fast Fact: Spain’s Caribbean colonies were a launching pad for the conquest and settlement of Panama, Florida, Mexico, and other parts of the Americas.

Look and Learn: Taíno Language and the Taíno Today

Across the Caribbean, many places and things still have Arawak names.

Making Connections: Caribbean peoples are still inspired by their Native ancestors today. They are reconnecting with their Native heritage by recovering local traditions and preserving natural resources. Do you have any traditions that are important to you or your family? How do you make sure that these traditions are not lost?

Fast Fact: Some contemporary Taíno peoples study Arawak with the hope of preserving it.

Look and Learn: The vocabulary chart below shows some words we use today came from the Arawak language. The Spanish who first encountered the Arawak absorbed the words into their language. The words were then absorbed into English through encounters with encounters with Spanish speakers.

Puerto Rican superhero La Borinqueña encounters the powerful deity Yucahu, who appears as a mountain-sized version of a cemí. Comic book illustration from La Borinqueña #1, written and created by Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

Tell a story or share a memory about the role or influence of ancestry in your own life. Post this on social media with #Taino to join the conversation.

To learn more, visit AmericanIndian.si.edu.

Learn about the living legacy of the Taíno! There is a growing movement of Taíno peoples celebrating their Native heritage. This movement challenges the belief that Native peoples in the Caribbean became extinct.

Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean is a collaboration of the National Museum of the American Indian and the Smithsonian Latino Center. This exhibition and related programming are made possible through the support of the Ralph Lauren Corporation and INICIA of the Dominican Republic. Federal support is provided by the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Cover image: Leonarda “Doña Esmeralda” Morales-Acevedo strips the fiber from a maguey plant to make thread for weaving hammocks. San Sebastián, Puerto Rico. Courtesy of Christina González, and supported by the National Science Foundation.

Learn about the living legacy of the Taíno! There is a growing movement of Taíno peoples celebrating their Native heritage. This movement challenges the belief that Native peoples in the Caribbean became extinct.

Smithsonian
Who Are the Taíno?

Arawak-speaking peoples from South America began settling the Caribbean islands more than 2,000 years ago. Their descendants, the Taíno, reside on the Greater Antilles and surrounding islands. The Spanish first recorded the term Taíno in 1493. Today many Caribbean people with Native ancestry embrace calling themselves Taíno.

Look and Learn: Where are the Greater Antilles? Can you identify all the present-day islands that make up the Greater Antilles?

Fast Fact: Did you know that the Taíno people of the Bahamas were the first Native peoples to encounter Christopher Columbus in 1492? The Taíno shared the Greater Antilles with other Native groups who spoke different languages. After 1492, Europeans began lumping all the Native peoples together as “Indians.”

The Taíno Homeland

During the early 1500s, the Spanish reported large Taíno communities on all the islands between Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Taíno peoples used the natural materials found in their environments to survive. They developed rich craft, food, music, and healing traditions.

After European colonization, surviving Native peoples held onto many of their healing, farming, weaving, and pottery traditions.

Making Connections: Did you know that the Taíno made objects such as maracas, canteens, bowls, and spoons from dried calabash tree gourds.

Before and After European Contact

Taíno peoples already had their own ceremonies and traditions and concepts of leadership and spirituality before contact with Europeans.

Fast Fact: The Taíno did not have a written language before contact with the Spanish. So how do we know about their beliefs and traditions? One way is through a science called archaeoethnobotany: Archaeologists study materials such as pottery, stone objects, and burials that cultures leave behind in order to learn what those cultures may have been like.

Making Connections: Why did so many Native people die from diseases? Why do you think the Spanish thought it was okay to enslave African and Native peoples? Was it okay? Why or why not?