Lost Cultures: Living Legacies

**Episode Title:** The Taino: A Constantly Evolving Caribbean Identity

**Episode Summary:** When researcher Jorge Estevez visited the Smithsonian as a boy, he saw a sign that stated his people had “disappeared” four centuries before. How did this claim become conventional wisdom? To get to know the history of the Taino people is to understand the effects of brutal colonization combined with historical misinformation — and the process of cultural fusion, which created a people with roots tied to indigenous Caribbean, European, and African ancestors. Estevez guides us through the story of the Taino people, while Irka Mateo explains some of their spiritual beliefs. Meanwhile, Valerie Varga, Estevez’s wife, shares some of the destinations that are important to the Taino along with tips on how to visit them as a mindful tourist.

**Episode Type:** Full

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**Part 1: Cold Open.**

**Jorge Estevez:** I went to work at the museum 26 or 27 years ago. I started there as a contractor and then, eventually, I was hired to work full-time. But my first experience with the museum was when I was very young. When I was about 11 or 12 years old, I went on a school trip to the museum and I wanted to show my friends indigenous culture from the Caribbean. I used to always see the commercials on television of the museum. And even though the museum was actually pretty close to where I was living, I had never been there. So, when I got there, I remember that there was a big sign that said, “West Indies and the Tainos.” I ran up there. And I was like, "You see. Look at all these objects. They come from my country." They were, you know, Taino objects from all over the Caribbean. But there was this little sign that read, "Sadly, by 1565, all the Tainos had disappeared." And I remember that struck such a chord with me. It just bothered me. And I kept visiting the museum every Sunday, when all my friends would go to church, I would sneak on the train as a little boy and go to the museum. I would always look at that little sign and wanted to kick it off, you know. My name is Jorge Baracutei Estevez. I am the cacique of the Higuayagua Taino people, father of nine (laughs). I come from a town in the
Dominican Republic called Jaibón. I was raised in New York. I am Taino. And, I’ve been involved with the Taino restoration movement since back in the 1980s.

**Music: Lost Cultures theme begins as bed and continues under Narrator.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** The people now known as Taino were among the first indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean. And while the Smithsonian may have once had a sign that declared them extinct, people like Jorge Estevez have devoted their lives to proving that he and his culture still very much exist. Welcome to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel + Leisure.I’m your host, Alisha Prakash.

*** Part 2: Series & Episode Intro. ***

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up from bed to full volume, then back down to bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** What can we learn about a place by delving into the people who once lived there? In what ways do cultures build upon each other as populations come and go? How do they complement each other, interact, and leave their marks on the people that come after them? And are cultures truly ever lost, even if the people move on?

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades back up to a climax, then ends. After a beat, incidental music fades in as bed, then continues under Narrator.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Whether you know them by name or not, you’re very likely familiar with the Taino people for one simple reason. They are the people who first encountered Christopher Columbus when his ships arrived in the Americas. But beyond that, they are a people with a long and rich history, so let’s return now to our main story guide for this episode, Jorge Estevez…

**Music: Incidental music changes then continues under the start of next part, before fading out.**

*** 3. History ***

Jorge Estevez: About 9000 years ago, there were no human beings living in the Caribbean. According to archaeologists, there was a lot of land mammals that soon after the arrival of humans started going extinct. We had monkeys. We had giant sloth, et cetera, et cetera. It was
between maybe 8500 to 9000. They haven't really pegged down exactly what it was. But at about this time period, people started migrating from South America. Now, there was about four archaic migrations. So, we know that of these four migrations, three of them came from South America. And these people were Arawakan-speaking peoples…

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** The term “Arawaken” refers to a family of languages that originated in South America, by the way…

**Jorge Estevez:** But there is one lineage that came from the Yucatán. Now, this lineage is pre-Mayan. There were no Mayans when this happened because this is going back 8000 years. That one lineage did come from the Yucatán. It's the least. I think only one or two bones were found with that signature. Everything else goes back to South America. So, these people entered the Caribbean. They were supposedly pre-ceramic, and there they were, you know, amongst themselves for about 4000 years. But then, 3000 years ago, other migrations from South America began coming up. And these people are known as Saladoid in archeology.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** : It is believed that the Saladoid culture originated in Venezuela…

**Jorge Estevez:** These people began island hopping. Some of them are said to have come straight from South America crossing the vast ocean, not island hopping, but straight from South America to Puerto Rico, to the Dominican Republic. And today because of genetics, we know that some of the migrations came through the South, like Southern Puerto Rico, Southern Dominican Republic. And then, another migration came from the north and then spread in those directions. And one of the things that we know today as well is that the newer migrations did not intermingle much with the older… there's very little admixture. At least, they haven't found any.

--- 4. Columbus/Spanish ---

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** According to Estevez, it is the people from the later migration who would eventually encounter Christopher Columbus’ expedition – and who would also come to be known as Taino.

**Jorge Estevez:** So, this is what happened. When Columbus landed in the Caribbean and the way we say, when he was discovered in the Caribbean, right, he says that there was one language that was spoken throughout all the Caribbean. Personally, I don't believe that. Since all the languages that were spoken were Arawak, they did understand each other somewhat. But, mostly, I think they were using some kind of pantomime 'cause Columbus mentioned this several times.
Alisha Prakash (Host): And though we’ve spoken several times on this podcast about the impact of European colonization on indigenous peoples, the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean is perhaps the most infamous instance of this – at least for those in the United States who may have grown up learning of his so-called discovery of the land that is now that country. In fact, though, he and the Spaniards he led arrived in the Bahamas, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic in 1492. And after interacting with the people he met, he wrote this in his diary.

Columbus (voice actor): They traded with us and gave us everything they had, with goodwill. They took great delight in pleasing us. They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor do they murder or steal. Your highness may believe that in all the world there can be no better people. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Of course, while that all sounds extremely complimentary, Columbus may have been enthusiastic about the goodwill and other characteristics he reported for less than altruistic interest. Instead, the diary entry may be a sign that he falsely saw the Taino as a docile people whom he could easily subjugate. Regardless of the purpose of that entry, though, it didn’t take long for the new arrivals to show their true colors. Columbus traveled back and forth between the Caribbean and Spain multiple times and grew more cruel as time went on. During this period, he kidnapped indigenous people and sold them into slavery in Spain. He also forced the Taino people to work on farms and in mines and demanded tributes. And if gold or cotton quotas weren’t met, harsh penalties were carried out, such as cutting off hands and leaving victims to bleed to death. The ruthlessness and cruelty of Columbus and the Spanish was, of course, on top of the diseases that the colonizers brought – as they always did, anywhere they encountered indigenous peoples. As a result of the violence and disease wrought by the Spanish, it’s thought that around 50,000 Taino died within two years of Columbus’ arrival – according to the National Humanities Center. That said, the Taino proved not to be, as Columbus seemingly believed, a docile people put on Earth to serve his interests. In fact, over the course of the next few decades, the Taino resisted and revolted against the occupation of the Spanish. Most well-known is the rebellion led by a Taino cacique named Enriquillo on Hispaniola - the island where Haiti and the Dominican Republic now exist. From 1519 to 1533, he and his 3,000 followers battled with the Spanish, eventually winning recognition of their freedom, as well as land and charters, but we’ll come back to that a little later. So how is it, then, that a myth took hold in which the Taino supposedly went extinct within 3 to 5 decades of a successful rebellion – a myth Jorge Estevez saw propagated by a sign at the Smithsonian as a child? One reason comes from the writings of a priest.

=== 5. Extinction Myth ===

Jorge Estevez: Bartolomé de las Casas, is a priest who's known as the defender of the Indians. However, he landed on the island in 1502 with the same aspirations as all the other Spanish. He wanted to have Indians under his belt. He was what they call encomendero.
Alisha Prakash (Host): Which means he held a Spanish title for land on which indigenous people lived and was allowed to require tribute from those inhabitants...

Jorge Estevez: But after a while, after seeing all the atrocities, he began to have a change of heart. And he constantly over-exaggerated how many Indians were dying. So, a lot of his writings is like, "Oh, all the people died here." But then, if you read a little further down, you'll see that there were still Indians there. But he was always saying that they were all dead. There's one part where he says that when you're sailing back to Spain, you can follow the bodies that were on the ocean because they were constantly throwing them overboard when they died. That's not true, you know? A That a lot of Indians were dying, absolutely, but a lot of the people that were being born at that time already developed herd immunity to all the diseases that the Spanish were bringing. So, certainly, a lot of people did die, but it wasn't true that by 1565, there was only 500 Indians left. That is the lie. So, naturally, when historians look at that number, they say, "Well, how could that number possibly have populated and continue to grow?" And the Spanish were always doing that. Now, if you look at our history, you'll find mention of Indians in every single century, especially in the 1800s. There's always mention about how some priests were moving Indians from one place to another, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Enriquillo, the cacique who fought the Spanish, well, his people lost their Indian jurisdiction in their town in 1790 because they were now mixed because somehow mixture makes you “less than” in that mindset. And for us, that's not true. For us mixture just means that you're 100% of everything. It doesn't make you less than anything, so that's how the myth of extinction began to rise.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Estevez also pointed to what’s known as the “Black Legend” about Spain, in which the nation’s rivals in Europe looked down on them for the atrocities they committed in the Americas. But while atrocities certainly were committed, the Black Legend exaggerated the conditions even past the point of reality, ultimately adding false evidence to the historical myth and making it easier for people to believe that the Taino went extinct. All that said, the part those rivals played in building up the myth should by no means let Spain off the hook. Their atrocious actions toward the Taino of course laid the groundwork for both the Black Legend and the extinction myth narratives to take shape and take hold. But other, in a way, more calculated actions on Spain’s part also contributed.

Jorge Estevez: One of my good friends, Dr. Lynne Guitar, was one of the first historians to uncover how the Spanish were actually hiding Indians.

Alisha Prakash (Host): This hiding of so-called Indians came after the people led by the cacique named Enriquillo, who we mentioned earlier, won their war of rebellion after nearly 15 years of fighting in the Baoruco mountains.

Jorge Estevez: And after that, Taino people were supposedly no longer able to be kept as slaves. They were supposed to be given their freedom. Of course, this didn't really happen. But
Enriquillo’s people were given four towns to live in. And they settled there. Then, slowly through history, they went disappearing, just less and less mention of them. They become pretty obscure. One of the things that Dr. Guitar says is that the Spanish would, sometimes, have many Indians. And they would just switch them to an African category ’cause Africans were allowed to be enslaved. In this way, they would pay taxes on them, but these are actually Indians that they had there. And she has lots of examples, like that. It’s actually amazing how many times this happened. So, it was like cheating on their taxes in a sense, you know? There was one case where there was this Spaniard who had 200 Indians. This law comes down. So, he's claims that all his Indians died. And he imports 300 slaves, 300 African slaves. So what he does is he sells 200 African slaves. And he keeps a hundred of them. But now, it says that he has 300 Africans. He's made a profit on the 200 slaves that he sold, but he has a whole bunch of Indians that were already working with him.

**Jorge Estevez:** Meanwhile, while this is happening, there are families up in the mountains all over the Caribbean especially in Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. And they're taking in Africans. And they're taking in Spanish that were not part of that whole thing. And they're intermarrying. And they're becoming rooted to that land. And they're surviving, but knowledge that had been on the island for thousands of years is what led to the modern day Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans, Jamaicans, et cetera.

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**6. A Tripartite People**

**Ikra Mateo:** In Quisqueya, Dominican Republic, we are of mixed descent. So, we are Taino. We also have ancestors who come from Africa and ancestors who come from Europe, especially Spanish people in our island.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** This is Irka Mateo, a singer-songwriter of Taino descent from the Dominican Republic.

**Ikra Mateo:** I am known also as Akutu Irka, which in Taino, Hiwatahia reconstruction language means abuela, grandmother.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** As part of her musical practice, Mateo has immersed herself in the folk music and spiritual traditions of her island. We’ll come back to that reconstruction language she mentioned, by the way, later in the episode…

**Ikra Mateo:** We are a tripartite people that has at least three origins. But depending on how you feel, how you have been brought up, people have different identities, right? So my identity is Taino. And I got it from my maternal grandmother, who was born in the southwest of the
island in a province that is considered the Taino capital of the Dominican Republic. And this place is called San Juan de la Maguana.

Alisha Prakash (Host): We asked Mateo to share some of her experience with Taino ceremonies and spiritual healing practices.

== 7. Spiritual Practices ==

Ikra Mateo: The Taino spirituality believes that our family, when they pass, become our guides and our protectors. When they reach Soraya, which is the place where we go after we pass. The Taino spirituality considers our ancestors like people who are very sweet, who listens to you, who talks to you. It is not about guilt. It is not about punishing. It is about embracing you, listening to you, and comforting the people. And the spirituality is called agua dulce, sweet water. We do ceremonies to connect to our ancestors and be secret guidance. These are shamanic journeys. And this is what our ancestors used to do. We use a medicine called cojoba, which is a mix of some seeds and other herbs and vines and many other things, put together. This used to allow the caciques and the vejique, which are the shamans, the medicine men and women, to reach to the mystery of the universe and get in touch with the ancestors. It was a place where they went to ask the question they needed for governing the yucayeque, which is the villages, right? And also where they went to get information, the vejiques, the shamans, for treating illnesses. Today, we are doing that. We can either use the medicine plant or we don't. A big percentage of shamans don't use medicine plants or just use them in special occasions. This is a very strong medicine that is not recreational. It is very sacred. It's not something that you're going to do every weekend because. And we teach the people how to do these shamanic journeys and how to contact the ancestors and all the protocol to interact with them and the protections that you need when you are out there. And we are animist. So we believe that everything has a soul. And that here we share this planet with other people who are the animal people, who are the plant people and the rock people. Also that the four elements are our grandparents because they came before us and the four directions to the east, the south, west and north. They are our grandparents. The elements are also our grandparents because they were also before us. And they are the ones who keep us alive. Water is life, right? There is the wind that brings us the oxygen. There is the fire that keeps us warm and also helps us cook our food. And there is the earth that is the mother of all of us and who give birth to all of us. The plants and the animal also sacrifice their lives so that we can live. So we have, respect for everything that is around us. And we are also part of nature. Even though we live in cities, we are still (laughs) on planet earth. It doesn't matter that we live in apartments and all that. So another thing is that we also consider the planets of our solar system as our grandparents. They were here before us. And the ancestors were great astronomers. These are some of the principles from our spirituality.
Alisha Prakash (Host): Mateo also told us how some Taino people interact with their ancestors via spiritual practices...

Ikra Mateo: We have representations of our zemis. Zemis is ancestors in our language, which means sweetness, because they are very benevolent ancestors. And still today, we represent them with carving on stones, on wood, on shell, and ceramics. And they have powers that we want to have. So if we want to have this power, then we worship these zemis. And this was like this since the times of our ancestors. We have ceremonial tobacco that was brought from our ancestors, the Arawakan people from the northeast of South America. And we still in the Dominican Republic make the ceremonial tobacco in the way that our ancestors hundreds of years ago brought it from there. And this tobacco is also an offering to our zemis in our altars. I wanna clarify that the tobacco is the most sacred plant for indigenous people. We believe that our prayers are carried to our zemis, to our ancestors through the smoke that travels to the sky. We don't smoke tobacco every day. The tobacco is just ceremonial. We heal with the smoke of the tobacco. We make offerings to our elders and our ancestors with the smoke of the tobacco, and for the healing, we don't even inhale the tobacco. We just put it in our mouth and just smell it if we are doing any healing, or we just light it like an incense, but we were never addicted to the tobacco like today, you know. And this happens with a lot of our sacred medicines that are taken from the indigenous cultures, but people don't know the spiritual and sacred meaning. It’s like the ayahuasca, the peyote, and our cojoba, and the tobacco. They are transformed into these recreational products that are harming people out there because you’re not supposed to be smoking tobacco every day, and also with all the these additive. It is a lack of respect to the beliefs of indigenous people to appropriate our sacred plants for recreation.

Alisha Prakash (Host): We’ll be back with more after the break.

AD BREAK

Alisha Prakash (Host): I’m Alisha Prakash, and you’re listening to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel & Leisure.

=== 8. Why “Taino?” ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): Now that we know some of the history and beliefs of Taino peoples, let’s pause and back up for a moment. As has also been the case with people discussed in previous episodes, the name we know the Taino peoples and cultures by is not one they gave themselves. So how did they come to be known as Taino?

Jorge Estvez: That name came to us, basically because there was a man who lived – I think it was in the late 1700s – whose name was Rafinesque.
Alisha Prakash (Host): This would be Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, a man of science born in Constantinople to a French father and a German mother. His main fields of interest were biology and botany, but after moving to the United States he also became interested in indigenous cultures of the Americas.

Jorge Estevez: And he and several others had deduced that every time that the Taino people were speaking to Columbus or other Spanish, they always made a distinction between the Caribs, this new group that was coming up from South America or themselves, the Taino, right? So, I personally believe that the word Taino, what it means is “relative,” you know? And certainly some of the other Arawakan groups like the Garifuna who speak an Arawakan language, they have words like Nidihenu, which is the oldest was Nidainu hich means “our relatives,” you know? But they’re the ones who gave us this name Taino. And it stuck for a reason because everybody on the islands were related to each other in one way or another, ’cause every genetic signature in the Caribbean except for that one in, in Cuba, the one that came from the Yucatán, it's all Arawakan. So, it's coming from the same trunk of people. So, naturally, when people speak a similar language, they know that they’re related. And I've encountered this all over the Americas. I've been in Mexico where Yaqui people speak of the Comanche in the United States as relatives because they speak a similar language, so they call them brothers or they call them family. So, I think that that's exactly what was going on with us. So, today when we say Taino, we use it, at least for me, in the same way that people use the word African, right? When we say Africa, the first thing that we think about is people from that continent. And that encompasses a whole wide range of peoples. So for us, Taino is that one unifying term for all the indigenous people of the Caribbean. That's what was left. Bits and pieces from all the different groups that were living in Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Haiti, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, all of this today coalesced, converged and became what we call Taino today. And it seems to have resonated really deeply because the Taino movement is always growing.

=== 9. Taino Restoration / Smithsonian ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): The growing movement Estevez is referring to emerged in the 1970s and really began to take hold in the 1980s...

Jorge Estevez: At the beginning of what we call restoration, people began getting together to explore the indigeneity that’s in the Caribbean, ’cause it's one thing to hear that there are no more indigenous people, that there's no indigenous culture in the Caribbean, and there's another to know through family stories that there is something that's there. So, in the late '80s, people started grouping together in organizations. It started with one big organization that later broke up into two organizations. And then, these organizations began to acquire more of a tribal structure, appointing chiefs and medicine people, and things like that.
Alisha Prakash (Host): According to Estevez, a key factor in the development of this revival movement was that many Caribbean people – especially Puerto Ricans – began to take part in pow-wows. He told us about a group of Puerto Rican Boy Scouts who, in the 1960s, were allowed to dance and eventually became known as the Brooklyn Drums. Their dancing inspired many others of Caribbean descent to attend pow-wows and to generally congregate and explore their shared or similar heritages.

Alisha Prakash (Host): This in turn led to the formation of the Asociación Indígena de Puerto Rico and, while this group eventually split into other groups, the movement had begun.

Jorge Estevez: As time went on, more groups developed. And then, it started spreading throughout the Caribbean, so today you have groups in Jamaica, in Haiti, in Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and in Cuba. Aach of the groups have their appointed chiefs. I started Higuayagua mostly 'cause I wanted to create a group of researchers. I was trying to avoid the whole tribal structure 'cause my thing is research. But it's inevitable that, as you get more and more people, you have to manage it. I was a logical choice since I was the one who formed a group to take over that responsibility. But it is a responsibility, one that I do not wish (laughs) on my enemies, you know. I say that jokingly 'cause it's actually... quite an honor to do it, but it is hard work.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Estevez’s work eventually led him back to the very institution that once tried to tell him his people were extinct. He’s now an educator at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

Jorge Estevez: Somehow, I ended up working at the museum, and as soon as I was there and I was privy to the collection – at that time period, there was like 1.8 million objects in the collection, and about 30,000 of them were from the Caribbean – I was like a kid in a candy store. Every single day, there was something for me to research, something for me to look at. But in the back of my mind, I always wanted eventually to see a Taino exhibit, but not one where the Tainos are placed on this pedestal, just the archaeological and no reference to the continuity. My good friend, brother, and boss at one time, Dr. Jose Barrero... I actually had invited him to the museum to work on a small exhibit that we were able to put up by a woman called Marisol Villanueva which is a photographic exhibit. Well, she went to all these communities in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and also amongst the Carib descendants in Trinidad and in Dominica. But it was more of an artistic exhibit, so that left everyone with a thirst for more, especially me so, I invited Jose to come in and cover Cuba for a program that I had done. And he told me that he was going to be working at the museum, and as soon as he came to work at the museum, he told me, "Jorge, give me five years. In five years' time, we will get an exhibit up. One way or another, this has to happen." And like my wife says, "From your lips to God’s ears," you know, because it was time. Then, one day, I got visited by Ranald Woodaman and Eduardo Diaz from the Smithsonian Latino Center, and they wanted to hear about Tainos. They told me that they were thinking about working on an exhibit. They wanted to partner up with the Museum of the American Indian to do an exhibit. And I was like, "Wow, this is really gonna happen." So, it finally came to be that we were able to work on an
exhibit on Taino continuity And it became one of our better attended exhibits because people were coming in by the thousands to see it. I mean you put a Taino exhibit in a place with two million Puerto Ricans, you know [laughs] it's gonna get packed. And it wasn't until I was leaving the museum — 'cause I had to leave shortly after the exhibit went up — that I realized that, in my own way, I got to kick that sign off the wall, the one that read a long time ago all the Tainos had become extinct. And throughout that time, I was sent to Puerto Rico, to Jamaica, Dominican Republic, et cetera, et cetera, going to these isolated communities where there was lots of Taino continuities or what Dr. Barreto taught me of markers of indigeneity. And it was amazing. I mean everywhere that I went, I saw different levels of continuity, but continuity nonetheless. What's missing on one island is found in another…

=== 10. Taino Dictionary ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): The idea of finding something that’s missing in one place in another is similar to something that was brought up back in Episode 4 of this podcast, when we talked about the Tongva people of the Los Angeles Basin. In that episode, Desiree Martinez mentioned how the Tongva language is being re-established through examining ethnographic and anthropological records, but also through other means, such as looking at sister languages. Remember how we said we’d come back to the reconstruction language that Irka Mateo mentioned earlier in this episode? Well, Jorge Estevez can tell us about the project, which he’s been involved with and which is similar, in a way, to the effort with the Tongva language…

Jorge Estevez: I have been collecting Taino words, especially words that were not recorded by the Spanish for a long, long time, and I had thousands of words recorded. Plus, the ones that were recorded, the ones that you find in Taino quote-unquote, "dictionaries," which are not really dictionaries. It’s just like a collection of Taino words. Most of these words are place names. However, I came to realize that most of these words were nouns and that as much as we were trying to speak Taino, with what was left, the Taino language is gone, and the more I looked into it, the more I realized that there were different dialects. You can clearly see how one word is using one way on one island but it’s differently in another island. I just felt that language reflects the history of a people as well. So, to take a people's language as it is, was like appropriating in a sens, but I knew also that we were gonna have to appropriate anyway. We would have to use words, verbs from other Arawakan languages to create a new language. So, I knew that whatever was gonna come out of it was gonna be a new thing.

Now, I had made friends with a linguist. Her name is Alexandra Aikhenvald. So, when I said that to Alexandra, she told me, "Jorge, you finally got it. I was waiting for you to get this yourself," because every time that I spoke to her about what we were doing, she kept quiet. She goes, "The best of luck to you." But she was never really, I think, too happy with borrowing somebody
else's language. And then, she says to me, “If you do it in this way, you decide what the rules are” and then she gave me all these different examples of new languages that were being recreated by certain groups that had also lost their language. And to me, that was like, "Oh, I was off to the races. So, I already had many, many dictionaries of other Arawakan languages, especially the ones closest to Taino. So, I began borrowing them. Now, she introduced me to this concept called nested identity. And nested identity is basically when you have people of different ethnic groups or you have different ethnic groups converge together in one spot, they begin to intermarry. And as they intermarry, their children begin borrowing words from this language from that language, and in time new identities are formed. And a new language emerges. So, I took all the words I was gonna borrow from all the dictionaries. And then I imagine myself living in a community, and to me, the people were these different dictionaries. I wondered what would be the words that I would borrow. Well, I would borrow the ones that are easier for me to pronounce. And I started picking all the words that had cognates with Taino, I'd automatically borrow those. All the Taino words that are left over, I kept all of those as well. But one of the things that I did do was that I created a new orthography, like soft Cs became Ss. Hard Cs became Ks. And Qs became Ks. The Spanish Gua, G-U-A, is actually not Arawak, and through Arawak is W-A. And then, when I started borrowing words from other languages, I didn't borrow them as they were. I changed them into this new orthographic style. And then, the words started falling into place. I started finding more and more cognates with classic Taino. To this day, I'm still amazed at how much is easier to translate doing it in this way. And before I knew it, I ended up with over 25,000 words. Now, because I'm not a linguist, you know... If I'm gonna speak about archeology, I have archaeologist friends. And I talk to them first to see how they feel. Same thing with genetics, and the same thing with linguistics. One of my dear friends, Jessie Hurani Marrero kept asking me questions that were becoming harder and harder to answer because she's asking me about transitive verbs and all this really technical talk with language. So, I knew that I had to bring her in to help me with this. That's when it really picked up. And before we know, we ended up with a language.

My goal was only to have a very tiny language so that my group could communicate with each other like, "Hello, Bob. How are you doing? How are you feeling? How are the kids." You know, like that. But Taino people are so hungry. The Caribbean people are so hungry that one day they're asking you for like, "How do you say hello?" And the next day they're saying, "How do you say anti-disestablishmentarianism," you know, like they just wanna know (laughs) higher and higher words. So, I found myself looking for more and more words. But it works. The language works. And we've been invited to participate with other Arawak people who are also in the same boat as we are, reclaiming their language, or reviving their languages.

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays for a moment.

Alisha Prakash (Host): We asked Estevez if he could share some destinations travelers could visit in order to interact with Taino culture in a responsible way...

Jorge Estevez: For that, I am going to pass this over to my wife.
Valerie Vargas: What? (laughing)

Jorge Estevez: Yes. My wife is from Boricua, from the island of Puerto Rico. And I think that Puerto Rico has a lot more to offer in that than the Dominican Republic at the moment. So, please, can you answer that question, honey? Thank you. (laughs)

Valerie Vargas: Hi. My name is Valerie Vargas. My Indian name is Toreyari, which means “jewel of the sky.” I am a healer for the tribe of Higuayagua. I'm also a registered nurse, mother of nine and very lucky to be married to this gentleman right here. So places that have cultural significance in Puerto Rico in specific, there are a lot of places. There's Caguana, which is off the beaten path. It's our ancient ballpark. As you hear, the Mayans used to play ball, sort of like a soccer type of thing and have to get it through a ring. Tainos did something similar. And that was all part of a big celebration called Arieto. So, there are a couple of very important ballparks. One of them is in Caguana. The other one is in Ponce. And it's called Tibes. It's very interesting the way they make the ballparks as well because it works with the sun and the seasons. So, there's one ballpark, Tubes, that has actually a star-shaped sort of area where people would come and gather. But at certain times like at the Equinox, apparently, the way of sun will hit the top of that star, so it's interesting to see how our ancestors could figure this out with their astronomy knowledge. The Caguana is a special place also because the ballpark is lined with these upright stones that are flat. And on them, they have petroglyphs or carved out designs. And one of the major designs is this mother of our water or Atabeya. She's represented in that ballpark as the lead figure. She's very important to all of us, but in particularly women because she gave birth, and she is a symbol of fertility and water, water spirit as well.

My family is from El Yunque which is the rainforest. And that's where a lot of my personal ancestors are from. There's a couple of beautiful waterfalls that are in El Yunque as well. You can just feel the presence of, of our ancestors. If you come with that mindset, obviously, you can feel the presence of our ancestors in the water, in the leaves, in the trees, in the ground that you're walking on. It's so sacred, it's almost overwhelming. There are other smaller museums in San Juan and Ponce that would have information as well about the Taino, probably not as current as my husband's work is because he's done a tremendous amount of work. It's very much accepted and adopted by our community. But, you know, there are a few holdouts out there who for whatever reason don't wanna accept the fact that we're still here. And this whole, you know, “Oh you're too mixed to be Indian”. But my main focus is Taino. Why? Because I come from there, because that is the land that my ancestors stood on a rock and looked to the sky. And I'm looking at the same thing that my great, great 10 times great grandmother saw as well.

Yes, I have this admixture which enhances me. And this is my people today. And there's nothing you could tell me that's gonna change my mind because my identity is my own. Jorge and I talk about that a lot, you know. When we bring people in and start educating them, they realize, "Geez, I am Taino." And we tell them that is what you choose to identify with. That is what you are because no one has the right to take that identity away from you. So, to me, that's really important in the Taino community.
Music: Lost Cultures theme fades down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Thank you to our guests, Jorge Estevez, Irka Mateo, and Valerie Vargas. Be sure to follow Lost Cultures: Living Legacies on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And we’d love your feedback. If you could, please rate this podcast and leave us a review. We’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at travelandleisure.com/lostcultures. In our next episode, we’ll explore the Cajun culture of South Louisiana, so make sure to come back for that. Until then, enjoy your travels!

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up for a moment, then back down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Lost Cultures: Living Legacies is a production of Travel + Leisure and Dotdash Meredith. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash, Associate Editorial Director at Travel + Leisure. Lottie Leymarie is our Executive Producer. Jeremiah McVay is our Writer and Co-producer. Dominique Arciero is our Audio Engineer and Editor. Stacey Leasca is our Researcher. Kyle Avallone is our fact-checker. This episode was reviewed by Bryan A'Hearn and Dot Coleman, panelists on Dotdash Meredith’s Anti-Bias Review Board, as well as Mackenzie Price, Director of Anti-Bias Initiatives. Jennifer Del Sole is Director for Audio Growth Strategy & Operations at Dotdash Meredith. Nina Ruggiero is Digital Editorial Director for Travel + Leisure. Maya Kachroo-Levine is Luxury and Experiences Editor at Travel + Leisure.

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays out.