

The Amazon of Matinino

A Personal Legacy of Female Empowerment in the Greater Antilles

Despite the notable research by social scientists on the impact of colonialism on current gender relations in the Caribbean, little is known about the indigenous (Taino) history of female empowerment in the Greater Antilles prior to the arrival of Columbus, and its possible echo impact on the lived experiences of island women, both in the Caribbean and the diaspora. The overall image that emerges from most of the literature is negative: indolent, easily subjected, immoral and savage. Lesser known accounts tell a very different story. In 1493, Christopher Columbus wrote to Queen Isabella about a group of women he encountered while sailing in Caribbean waters. He referred to these women as Amazons. "These women, moreover, perform no kind of work of their sex, for they use bows and darts..." (Paiewonsky). There are several historical accounts of attacks on Columbus and his crew by these "warrior women." Prior to the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean, Taino culture was based on a matrilineal system, which determined inheritance, residence and succession. This was a society in which women could and did attain leadership positions. This article recovers some of the earlier history of the Amazon women of the Greater Antilles through archival research, and seeks to use this knowledge to frame the lived experiences of a contemporary Puerto Rican mother and daughter, who survive difficult circumstances as a result of a maternal empowerment rooted in a cultural heritage and history of strength and resilience.

The climb up the makeshift steps leading to the stage seemed to go on forever. I lifted my robes so as not to accidentally trip over them and embarrass myself on this, the most "significant" day of my life. When I finally reached the top, I paused to catch my breath and quiet my agitated nerves before advancing to receive my Bachelor of Science degree from the Dean of Education of New

York University. It was a moment I had often despaired would never come and I found myself suddenly overcome with a bittersweet sadness. Before stepping off the stage, I looked out at the crowd seated in Washington Square Park, searching for a familiar face. Through the glare from the mid-day sun I spotted her, face tense, eyes moist. Even on this proud occasion, she was not smiling. Years of worry had carved permanent lines into her forehead and there was that deep familiar sadness in her eyes. She held my daughter firmly in her lap. The child sat very still, as always mature beyond her four years. I realized then that today was just as much their day as it was mine. For my daughter, this moment represented her own future possibilities—for my mother, a validation of her sacrifice and struggle.

My mother left her island home of Borinquen (modern day Puerto Rico) to settle in New York City at fifteen years of age. She was the first in her immediate family to leave the island in many generations. My family's history on the island goes as far back as Columbus' voyage to the Caribbean in the late fifteenth century, at which time my ancestor, a young Spaniard (descended from converted Jews) by the name of Miguel Diaz, first made his way to the New World. Diaz got into a violent dispute with Bartolome Colon, brother of Columbus and Governor of Hispanola (modern-day Dominican Republic), and stabbed him. Fearing execution, Diaz ran south to a place called *Haina* where he met and fell in love with the *Cacique* (Chieftain) *Osema*. She shared with him two secrets that would ensure his pardon (the cure for syphilis and the location of the largest gold mines on *Hispanola*). Thanks to *Osema*, not only was he pardoned, but years later he would be elevated by the admiral's son Diego to the post of Constable of *San Juan, Puerto Rico*. *Osema* followed Diaz and bore him the first two legitimate mestizos (persons of mixed blood) on the island (Herren). The stories of the voyages of Christopher Columbus and his crew are well known to every school age child in the United States and abroad. However, the stories of the *Taino*, the first people he encountered upon arriving in the New World, are not. Even less known are the stories of the "Amazons of *Matinino*."

In 1493, Columbus wrote to Queen Isabella regarding a group of native women he encountered while sailing in Caribbean waters. He referred to these women as "Amazons." "These women ... perform no kind of work of their sex, for they use bows and darts" (Paiewonsky). It was said that if any approached them outside the agreed upon time, or dared to follow them, they would "defend themselves with well-aimed arrows—believed to be shot with an expert eye" (Martir). And in another account it was reported, "women so fiercely held off the landing parties that cannons were fired to frighten them off" (Paiewonsky). Columbus searched in vain for these "mythical warriors" only to discover that they were simply young *Taino* girls undergoing rites of passage. As illustrated

by the story of the my ancestress, *Cacique Osema*, women in *Taino* society could and did attain positions of leadership and power. Jalil Sued Badillo relates the historical accounts of at least 37 female *Caciques* in *Hispaniola* and thirteen in *Borinquen* in “Las Cacicas Indoantillanas.” Upon being conquered by European conquistadors, *Taino* women warriors killed themselves in unprecedented numbers. Such was their courage and love of freedom:

Wherefore many went to the woods and there hung themselves, after having killed their children, saying it was far better to die than to live so miserably, serving such and so many ferocious tyrants and wicked thieves. The women, with the juice of a certain herb, dissipated their pregnancy, in order not to produce children. . . . Some threw themselves from high cliffs down precipices; others jumped into the sea; others again into rivers; and others starved themselves to death. Sometimes they killed themselves with their flint knives; others pierced their bosoms or their sides with pointed stakes (Benzioni).

Our “people” are from the towns of *Arecibo* and *Utua* located in the *Cordillera Central*, the central mountainous regions of Puerto Rico. This area is commonly recognized as the final refuge of the indigenous population during the conquest period. The group that emerged from the mixture of *Taino* natives and *Criollos* are the *jibaros*, primarily recognized for their strong attachment to the land and their *humildad*. When the United States claimed Puerto Rico as a territory in 1900, shortly after the Spanish American War, many land rights were abolished and property was confiscated by the U.S. government at will, for the development of American businesses and military bases. The economy in Puerto Rico was dismal as a result and Puerto Ricans were forced to relocate to the United States in droves in search of better jobs. My grandparents stayed and struggled to raise a family of ten children. My grandmother worked as a washerwoman and also made extra money as a spiritualist/herbalist, or what some would call a *Santera* or white witch. She had inherited the ability to speak with spirits, as well as knowledge of healing plants. My maternal grandfather cut sugar cane seasonally, as did my paternal grandfather, father, uncles, and my younger brothers. During the remainder of the year, my grandfather hired himself out as a handyman, or sold farm fresh produce that grew on his property to keep food on the table for my mother and her siblings.

My mother, a middle-child, felt largely ignored by her parents and abused by her siblings. They nicknamed her *doble-fea* (double-ugly), for having inherited the pale freckly skin of her Irish maternal grandmother and the broad, flat facial features of her mulatto (African/*Taino*) grandfather, and not the

preferred European bone structure and facial characteristics of her blonde/blue-eyed father. At the age of fifteen my mother, a highly promising student, was forcibly removed from school for falling in love with the “wrong boy”. She was sent to New York City to continue her education while living with a racist and abusive paternal aunt, who prided herself on her pure Spanish ancestry. To escape this oppressive environment, my mother eloped at the age of sixteen with my father, a handsome neighbor—seven years her senior.

My father was a fiercely proud *jibaro* from the *Utua* region of Puerto Rico. He was a Diaz and the eldest son in a family of ten, destined to inherit the home and property of his father and remain on the island. Perhaps in an attempt to escape this destiny, he decided to set out for New York City to make his own “fortune”. He saw in my mother an intelligent resourceful young woman who could help him achieve his goals. What he had not counted on was the fertility of the *Centeno* women. By the time she was nineteen my mother was pregnant with her third child. The financial stress of having to support so large a family, on so small an income triggered migraines and uncontrolled rages. My father’s anger erupted in violence, and he raped and beat my mother on a regular basis. When she became pregnant with me, my father beat her severely and threw her down a flight of stairs, hoping she would abort.

My father’s anxiety about the fertility of Puerto Rican women was shared by several powerful factions of American society, who feeling threatened by the “immigrant hordes” began experiments in eugenics technology. Clinics were set up in Puerto Rico that provided free sterilization for Puerto Rican women of any age. Often women were sterilized without their consent or knowledge, or else were coerced by false promises and misinformation to act as human guinea pigs. The intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class in the area of reproductive rights made Puerto Rican woman particularly vulnerable to medical abuses, with the blessings of the state. My father flew my mother and siblings back to Puerto Rico to get her sterilized immediately after she delivered me. As a result, I was the only one of my siblings actually born on Puerto Rican soil. This seemingly insignificant fact has had a tremendous influence on my life as the following poem (written when I was 17 years old) illustrates.

I was born on a mountain road
 Beneath the stars beside a mule,
 While back and forth my father strode
 Cursing fate for being so cruel
 His face was etched in an angry frown
 His body shook with rage and fear
 “Why couldn’t you wait until we got to town”?

She didn't answer, she didn't hear
 She bore the pains without a sound
 She didn't scream or cry out at all
 And so it was that on that ground
 A child was born fragile and small
 My mother held me to her breast
 Beneath the moon beside that mule
 She felt that surely she'd been blessed
 And fate had never been less cruel

For a brief period of time after my birth, we lived in *Utua*do, Puerto Rico with my paternal grandparents. At night, when the mountain winds blew through the cracks, it felt as if the hammocks, in which we slept, were hanging outside in the cold. My grandfather roamed the house speaking to spirits as if they were neighbors who had stopped by for a cup of coffee. At six months of age, I almost died of Bronchitis. My mother, fearing for my life and desperate to escape "Diaz Mountain," pleaded with my father to take us back to New York City.

In the early 1960s, we moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant (an African American community) in Brooklyn. It was the height of the Civil Rights era. The concrete streets were barren of any greenery. Many buildings were burned down and/or boarded up. Almost immediately my father resumed his physical abuse of my mother. One winter night, he beat my brother with a belt and drew blood. When my mother intervened, she too was beaten severely. My father, in his blind rage, threw them both out into the street with no coats. A beat cop spotted them shivering in the street and took them back home. He made my father leave the house saying, "If you don't want her, you leave!" My father did so and disappeared from our lives, eventually returning to *Utua*do with a new wife.

My mother, however, remained in New York City alone. Returning to her parent's home in Puerto Rico was out of the question for her. She could not forgive her mother for her rigid, cruel and unwavering banishment, and was determined to prove that she could make it on her own, despite the circumstances. She was too proud and stubborn to acknowledge failure and so she eschewed her family, homeland and culture and clung tightly to her belief in the "American Dream" and the benefits it might one day bestow on her own children. I know very little of how we managed to survive in those years. We were dirt poor and lived in tenements in two of the most notorious Brooklyn slums, known locally as "Do or Die Bed-Stuy" and "*Los Sures*" (Southside). My mother had to go on public assistance. In addition, she worked long hours in garment factories. This left the door open to abuse, by babysitters, neigh-

bors and a long list of “step fathers.” Needless to say, our upbringing was not idyllic. My mother did not wish to remarry, not wanting to relinquish control of her life or kids to anyone again. In spite of the hard times and poor living conditions, we all survived. The language, values, and traditional beliefs that I received at home from my mother sustained me. The occasional trips back to Puerto Rico to visit my grandparents nurtured my soul and strengthened my connection to my culture and my island. It was during these trips that I was taught the healing plants, remedies and traditions of Puerto Rico. In retrospect, I remember more happy times than sad, and the memories that have endured are ones of tenderness, strength and love—images of my mother’s stricken face hovering above mine when I was sick in bed with hepatitis and rheumatic fever, her face beaming with pride as she related my long list of academic accomplishments to her girlfriends, her face laughing and animated as she told us stories of *Juan Bobo* (a comic Puerto Rican folk hero), her face twisted in anger and rage when she stood up to my alcoholic stepfather and her tears of pain and disappointment when at eighteen years of age, in a fit of teenage rebellion, I, like her, married an abusive man, and later blamed her for my own poor judgment. Always it was her face that carried me through moments of pain and struggle—her face that was the source of my strength and passion for life.

When my mother was thirty-two years old, she received a phone call informing her that her mother had passed away in a hospital after a botched cataract operation. She cried tears of pain, loss and regret. That night she had a dream that her mother’s spirit came to her. In her dream, my mother asked my *abuelita* why she had sent her away from her family at such a young age. My *abuelita* responded that she had made the painful decision to send her to America so that she would have greater opportunity to fulfill her exceptional intellect and potential. In her dream my mother cried in her mother’s arms saying, “So, you did love me, mama. You did love me.” It was many years before she could come to terms with the death of her mother and forgive herself for the needless painful years of separation she had inflicted on herself, her family and her mother as a result of her stubborn pride.

In spite of this realization, it would be many more years before my mother could return to her *isla bonita*. As my mother had predicted, my first marriage to a neighborhood gang warlord, ended in the worst kind of disaster imaginable. My mother would later tell me how she stood outside the window of my apartment building listening to our violent arguments and crying tears of frustration—not knowing how to save me from my own self-imposed nightmare. When I finally escaped my husband, she was waiting with open arms. She asked no questions when I showed up on her doorstep with my ten-month-old baby girl. She quickly became mother to my daughter as

well as myself. She sacrificed those years so that I could return to college and earn my first degree—the degree that I believed would forever change my life. It was the fulfillment of my mother’s “American Dream” as well as my own, and it was a dream that had been purchased with her blood, sweat and tears.

The years that followed continued to challenge my strength and resilience in ways I could never have imagined. I repeatedly fell into volatile relationships, which always ended violently and/or abusively. In 1989, I married yet again. The abuse and degradation I endured with this man were the worst of my life. I feared for my life and the lives of my children. Finally, having reached the end of my rope, I joined a domestic violence group. I learned through the stories these women told to value myself. I also learned how social, political, and economic factors in my life had conspired to make me a victim. I finally understood the colonial legacy of abuse and misogyny I had been born into. My own “lived experience” served as a call to action. I felt obligated to learn as much as I could about the historical, political and economic factors that contributed to the continued social degradation and devaluation of women of color, as well as our earlier history as warriors, chieftains and goddesses. The knowledge that I uncovered was revelatory and transformational. It was as if all my life I had been living out of context and suddenly I could see my place in the story. I realized that all those “traits” I had been taught by society were inappropriate or deficient were just part of my cultural legacy. I understood that word “legacy” differently now, not just as indigenous teachings or language or recipes, but also as something alive in me—something that neither time nor lost memories could erase. And I stopped trying to change these things, and learned to appreciate the ways that I was different from Americans.

Toward the end of the '90s, my mother met the man that she would later marry. He purchased a home by the beach in Puerto Rico and wanted to take her back to live with him. My mother resisted. In spite of the fact that I was a grown woman, with a secure profession, she insisted she could not abandon me, and her granddaughters, to fate. I instinctively understood that she was afraid, so with a heavy heart, I encouraged her to go, assuring her that we would be fine. And so it was that forty years after my mother first set foot in Brooklyn, New York, she finally returned to the land of her roots. She returned a dejected warrior—defeated in a battle she could never hope to win, a battle she had been fighting against herself. She was welcomed back by two surviving sisters and four surviving brothers. After some months of trepidation, she knelt in her garden and dug her fingers deep into the dark moist earth and began planting her seeds, her offering to the *Taino* mother goddess, *Atabey*. When the first green sprouts started to emerge, she understood that her own self-inflicted banishment was finally over.

A few months ago, I visited my mother in her home in *Aguadilla, PR*. She seemed visibly older. Her arthritis was acting up, but she still rose every morning to prepare my *tasita de café con leche*. We spent long evenings talking en *el porton* under the stars, and watching her favorite *I Love Lucy* episodes from a DVD collection one of my daughters had sent her. We discussed her worries and concerns regarding the cancer and emphysema that are slowly killing her husband. In the midst of our discussion she revealed that her car had broken down and she could not afford to get it repaired. She was worried about getting her husband to the hospital in case of an emergency. I told her I would give her the money for the repairs. Not accustomed to asking for or accepting help from anyone, she struggled to contain conflicting emotions—gratitude and shame—and she turned her face away to hide tears. At that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in being my mother’s daughter—stubborn, hard headed, argumentative and proud to a fault—but fiercely loyal in protecting and providing for those we love. This was the warrior spirit I had inherited from her, and she in turn had inherited from her own mother, and so on, going back to the Amazon Warriors of *Matinino*, and further still to the very first *Taino* mother, *Atabey*. As an educator, a mother of four daughters and an activist for social justice, it has been my own warrior heritage that has inspired and sustained me. As I looked at my mother that night, I felt my heart ache, as if my chest were unable to contain the immensity of my feeling for her, or perhaps it was fear that in the not too distant future, she would be gone and I would be bereft of that Amazonian strength and fierce love that has been and continues to be the very fount of my existence.

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