

Archaeology and Rescue of the Aboriginal Presence in Cuba and the Caribbean

By Dr. Jorge Ulloa

The Caribbean is made up of a diversity of humans united by multiple socio-economic processes, where the introduction of African slaves, with their fan of cultures and hues, has been the weightiest event that defines the cultural particularities. To it is joined the super dimension of the influences exercised by the European powers, which has served to create supposed frontiers among the Caribbean Hispanic, English, French, and Dutch. The exacerbation of both points of view leads to the creation of distorted images or alignments with concepts of exclusive or excluding identities. The masquerading of cultural features engendered since those earlier moments of conquest, or their superficial and schematic valuation, have influenced a good deal of the studies about the history of the Caribbean and especially of Cuba, forcing them to turn about a single axle--the socioeconomic and emerging processes of one phenomenon, plantation slavery.

The plantation has been one of the fundamental heuristics to define the historic bases of the Caribbean peoples, seen by some as particular expressions of this phenomenon, where the historic differences were engendered in previous

centuries, just as its aboriginal contribution gives way to a model of society considered common from a certain moment throughout the Caribbean.

In order to think about the aboriginal aspect, it is important to leave to our judgment two essential questions:

1. The absence of a strong indigenous population in the modern Caribbean (19th and 20th centuries) limited by a cultural action and political consolidation directed by the rescue of its connections to history.
2. A rescue carried out by archaeology, which influences the correct form of conceiving the final proposition of this discipline and the supposed theories by which it is carried out.

The first of these essential elements has antecedents in the moments after the actual conquest when the nascent creole oligarchies began, with marked interest, the negation of the aboriginal presence with the aim of expropriating their lands. This contributed to the erasure of the

aboriginal connection to the Caribbean societies, and limited the references to the existence of objects or terms that recalled their culture as a stage fortunately overcome and perceptible only by means of elements near to their supposed original function.

In this sense it is important to keep in mind the primacy that is within the studies of history and anthropology in the area that has had the slave-owner controversy, almost always translated as or reduced to the racial white-black contradiction—with emphasis on the study of the plantation—which generates the relevant cultural mechanisms that characterize the Caribbean today.

To evaluate the studies of the contribution of the aboriginal societies in the case of Cuba it would be important to think about starting from the methodological proposition put forth by the researcher Joel James in his work, *La muerte en Cuba*, especially that which he defines under the concept of “limits.” The limits, according to James (1999), are instants of saturation created or signaled by harmonious agreement among all the defenders of a thesis, who comprise a social process like an active forge of human concurrence. These are moved by a sense of successive articulation with such rigor toward the point where all the over-determined constituent parts converge that none of them would be recognized as a specific entity. From this point of view, the limits are inevitable and are the essence of the social dialectic; furthermore, they have the capacity of referencing the past in the present.

In this perspective, to talk of the death of the pre-Columbian cultures not only takes into account the traumatism of the conquest by its violent effects but also its effects in the plane of culture, by the substitution of a system of values that

evolved throughout various centuries or millennium. Nonetheless the extinction is evaluated starting from the point of fusion or mestizaje, that is, by the reversion to a limit achieved within the creole societies of the principal values of the pre-Columbian groups. Death not only acts as an eraser but as a substitutive mechanism for the cultural dimensions and quantities, which translated them to another space and legitimized them. It was those mechanisms of hybridization and transculturation that gave culture the capacity to reform itself and resurface, in order to keep itself alive and free itself from the sense of exclusivity—that truncated its ownership of the nucleus of identity—which propitiated the interrupted character of Cuba’s history and its total ownership of the period called pre-Columbian.

The physical absence of the aboriginal does not imply that their forms of approximating reality will be absent from the collective unconscious of the Caribeño, many times through intangible or cloudy paths, if one tries to find them in a traditional empirical manner that intends to recall this culture via immovable or enclosed lines. The search in the plane of the present culture ought to be marked toward elements or expressions legitimized with other apparent origins and stir up a depth of manifestations of phenomenon that supposedly have come aboard since their pristine expression.

The rescue of the past starting with archaeology

Since the first decades of the 20th century, the eminent archaeologist and historian Vere Gordon Childe maintained that archaeology was a social science and as such ought to contribute to the

understanding of history. Upon this base it was considered that history was singular in that it could be analyzed scientifically to permit the establishment of useful rules in order to program the future.

Despite the early declarations of the notable researcher, one of the essential problems which trips up the discipline of archaeology today in the Caribbean context, including Cuba, is the full recognition of its social projection. Into it enter elements of theoretical classification and the conception of an assumed discipline which is practiced in an ethereal academia and disentails the most immediate problems, or as an evaluative science, descriptive of cultural variability with only diachronic backgrounds.

In this point of view, archaeology is converted into a negation of the past, and its work decontextualizes the societies that it studies, creating the impression of science that is uncompromised or without compromise by those who practice it, which reduces it in the worst cases to the plane of technical collector and conservator of pieces about petrified and conquered cultures.

This is a current that still underlies, consciously or unconsciously, Caribbean archaeology--recovering evidence from ancient groups with the hope of eventually explaining their cultural history. Although it is impossible to deny that archaeologists have improved and have notably enriched their techniques of collection and classification, the greater part of the investigations still tend to revolve around the coordinates of object, time, and space, conforming to sequences and cultural areas assumed as cultures and whose formation is the final objective of the researcher, which further perpetuates archaeology in the

status of descriptor or in the majority of cases classifier of settlements from which to automatically extrapolate the features of an original construction or new finds.

The major emphasis on material archaeology, especially on ceramics, is one of the essential factors that influence the conceptions of an archaeology limited to concepts of culture underpinnings in proposed theories such as historical particularism and functionalism, where the chronological descriptive aspects are above their consideration as concrete expressions of the activities of the men who live in societies and change historically.

The repercussion of this situation at the social level of the discipline has fostered an archaeology or a rescue of the aboriginal that expresses an apparent compromise with the national histories and expresses the alienation of scientific knowledge and the generation of bad conditions through the anxiety caused by competition in the intellectual market. Archaeology and rescue in this case only serve the function of the museum collecting paradigm, an expression of the social unfinished model or non-functional model from which emerge works of surprising and exotic art through which primitive peoples pass, decontextualizations of a social process that is the base of the present national history.

Rescue and archaeology—the Cuban case

The recognition of the “aboriginal” as something of a prior time and the much debated question of the Spaniards’ right to control the Island have been perpetuated since the beginnings of archaeology in Cuba, which was

generated in the 19th century and sketched a dichotomy more or less transparent about the discipline since its dawning on the island.

In the 20th century, the rescue of pre-Columbian cultures by archaeology took form with new scientific reasons that were translated in such a way as to broaden the discipline and promote the development of an assimilated historic vision of the aboriginal as an essential part of it, not just as an initial anecdote.

Researchers like Felipe Pichardo Moya and Fernando Ortiz are the most marked in these considerations of re-valuing the limits of traditional historiography through their subjugation of the chronicles and by the way they legitimated the search for the aboriginal contributions to the national formation, which defines the real fact of their survival in the most archaeological plane. Both researchers systematized information about the evidence and historical foundations in order to clarify the indexes of transculturation as a proof of the complex and diverse cultural relations.

In this period, archaeological work was organized as much on a normative methodological level as an institutional and legislative level. Scientific groups were created as was the National Commission of Archaeology as an institution capable of supporting the rigorous scientific publications and connecting the Cuban labors to those of the international organizations. Nonetheless, the most outstanding achievement of this period was the culmination of the field work and an important accumulation of information that was achieved not exactly around a base of total scientific rigor, but around a base of cooperation among professionals, hobbyists, and collectors. Among these works or in many of these works is the

genesis of the real local museums and the initial extension of the work of research across the entire country.

In this period, some Cuban archaeologists like Carlos García Robiou, René Herrera Fritot, and the same Pichardo Moya achieved nuclear archaeological conceptions of great importance for the Antilles, founding, considering the limited resources, a type of exemplary intellectual position that made it more independent, while at the same time helped to promote global advances in archaeology and to form particular conceptions for it. The success of this archaeology, or at least of its most distinguished representatives, should not be measured only with respect to the work of North Americans, especially those of Irving Rouse, but alongside the achievement that these results were assimilated and attempted to open new facets of research, in order to provide more depth of understanding and to more closely address the problems of that stage in Cuba and the Antilles.

Since 1959, various things changed for Cuban archaeology, many of them contributing to a qualitative leap in the discipline while in another sense, the theoretic sense, a certain stagnancy was produced that doesn't take into account many of the creative contributions of other Caribbean, Latin American or North American archaeologies. It closed itself off in a type of orthodoxy that limited the investigative dialectic and in many cases produced a species of mixture or hybridization among the old conceptions of functionalism and the particularism of Rouse, with intents to apply Marxism to the interpretation of pre-Columbian cultures. Some of the most important achievements of this period are seen in the professionalization of archaeological work, which imposed a qualitative leap on

the work of research and above all attempted to channel the work of the discipline toward the sense of the rescue of man and the coming of society.

Archaeology fundamentally revolves toward the improvement of the methodologies of research and the development of interdisciplinary work with better amplitude and rigorousness. The major emphasis is observed as much in the refinement of the systems of analysis as in the techniques of excavation. The protection of patrimony and the insertion of archaeological knowledge into the wealth of Cuban culture and history are advances that will receive improved state help from this moment on and already interest has increased in redefining the true contributions, traditionally opaqued by lack of knowledge, of the aboriginal societies to the processes that formed the nation. Despite these undeniable advances, it would not be just to evaluate the discipline of archaeology in Cuba and sketch some of its steps in the present without referring to some of the theoretical judgments that wrangled with the new Cuban archaeology, much of which, in my judgment, still provides a basis, with more or less rigor, for our form of focusing on research, while others have been superseded or are on the way to it, from which arises that which is known as the birth of a new critical, analytical stage that is opening up for Cuban archaeological science:

1. Poor management and mechanistics of some categories of materialist history, where there were frequently cases in which the comprehension of a society in its relations to dialectic materialism was not going further than the affirmation of the essential character of the economic base or

its determining role with respect to the relations of the rest of the social, institutional, or ideological expressions. This has provided for the creation of archaeological schemes that are necessarily related to supposed levels of economic development and, of course, to their respective levels of institutional ideological development. Profound analysis of this situation sketches a repetition in other dimensions of traditional archaeology, especially in reference to the derivative schemes of the ceramic styles and series, where the most important thing is the discovery, and the rest of the interpretation is preconceived according to a group of indicated archaeologists. In the case of Cuban archaeology today, the most frequent representation of this scheme is found in the classifications utilized on the effects of archaeological censuses of the island, where equal to the circular schemes circulate an essentially chronologic conception of advanced socioeconomics.

2. Reduction of the understanding of the history of societies that deal with the fundamental cause of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, with the aforesaid qualitative leap. In many cases the deficiencies in this sense are placed obliquely, starting from the minute typological descriptions of the pieces, minute descriptions of the geographic environment that the community faced, or the capacity to infer citations from those of Classic Marxism.

3. Fragmentation of the investigations or of the data obtained from them, which makes it difficult and on occasions impossible to exactly reconstruct the societies being studied. The situation is further complicated when it deals with regions from which only partial visions or problems of the research are obtained, so that, far from enriching the theoretical knowledge with the contribution of analysis of concrete situations, tends to promote the validity of the preconceived schemes or has created generalizations and schemes from a unilateral point of view. In this sense it reduces the explanatory capacity of a descriptive typology scheme for regular empiricists, with the pretensions of converting them into explanatory theories. The most eloquent example from Cuban archaeology in this sense is found in the studies about stonework and pottery.
4. Application of interpretive conceptions and methodologies used or validated in other contexts without testing, on occasion, the regional particularities or histories of the societies being studied.
5. Despite having gained in conscience, archaeology is not disentangled from the traditional problems of society and history that are still disentangling themselves from the essential problems of philosophy and anthropological theory, by which it continues filling brimful an empty space, considering that the most urgent obligations of the discipline do not strengthen it in this sense.
6. Predominance in research of the typological point of view and evolutionary chronologies with tonalities and hues imposed by restrictive typological concepts and the assumption of individual or regional sequences with which to generalize with respect to all of the island.
7. Consideration of the category of culture under a diversity of meanings with confused and ambiguous interpretations, which has operated as an instrumental or operational category for the research, that is, as a created instrument with different meanings levied according to the logic of the researcher, which grants a subjective, predetermined content by means of his own conscience and reasoning. The most eloquent examples in the case of Cuban archaeology are perhaps those of the Mayarí proto-agrarian culture, late Mesolithic, or communities with incipient Neolithic traditions, all meanings that were defined by characterizing the same phenomenon.

The last is important in order to emphasize that, despite the achievements of Cuban archaeology, it has not achieved a consolidation of a real explanatory practice. Although contributions of great importance exist, you cannot talk yet about a total super-actuation of the descriptive schemes. The influence of historical materialism and dialectic help to comprehend or insert a new sense into the scientific work, such as the discovery of new resources in research—especially economic—traditionally ignored or little recognized in the studies. Nonetheless, the inferential

level continues being low and has begun to give signs of the recuperation required to leave an opening toward other forms of the discipline's thinking and practice. Although the intentions are otherwise, the process of the reconstruction of archaic history is based essentially in the completion of schemes of behavior starting from typological dates and chronologies. The absence of archaeology and anthropology from the planes of the superior fields, as much as the lack of an academic specialization, with its teachers and postgraduates, which we've barely begun to glimpse, influences a good part of these deficiencies.

It is good that the final objective and intention of research is clear among the majority of us who do archaeology, save for exceptions who have not yet achieved alignment between their final objective and the completion or the application of all the passes or stages of the investigative process. On other occasions a theoretic eclecticism is more easily perceived that denotes a parallel march among old conceptions of the North American archaeology and the postulated Marxists and neoevolutionists as much as the intents to cross the borders of the empiric and recall the valiant attitudes of the search for a Cuban school of archaeology undertaken since the decade of the 50s of the 20th century by the most valuable scientists of the discipline.

Finally it would be important to signal which we judge to be the principal lines of work that Cuban archaeology has undertaken in recent years and within this new period of opening and analysis.

Understanding with precision the characteristics and magnitudes of pre-Columbian iconographic patrimony of some regions of Cuba. It is especially

projects of this nature that have experienced a high level of richness. This is the case of Banes in Holguín.

In these next approximations, the objectives have been concentrated on two basic questions:

1. To define a strategy of protection and preservation of the endowment.

2. To compile new information with which to confront the study of aboriginal communities, especially the agriculturalists, which permits us to complete our knowledge of all aspects of the social and ideological type, beginning with the iconography. Studies of this nature have, until now, been scarce in Cuban archaeology, and regional evaluations do not exist that offer a broad, carefully referenced body of graphics. On the other hand, intents have been initiated to surpass the descriptive and esthetic reference proposals in order to enter into semiotic-type studies or more near to symbolical archaeology where transformation of motives and applied techniques are analyzed, toward an understanding of the possible social and cultural signification of the piece within the context of the original societies. The most outstanding among these studies are those related to the representation of the frog and the crying heads (Boinayel) carried forward by the researcher Pedro Pablo Godo. This tendency also has begun in the studies of rock art.

Studies from a regional perspective with the aim of promoting new fieldwork and explorations, which have resulted in important findings and, on occasion, findings that were contradictory to the latest ruling schemes. This tendency confronts or surpasses the prevalent concepts that until some years

back tended to extend generalizations for all the island from very limited key points (for example Banes, Cayo Redondo, Guayabo Blanco, Canímar, Aguas Verdes, etc.) which, up to a certain point, were coincidental with the criteria of the key sites or types for referencing a culture.

The new work along this order, more so than the intent to complete existing schemes or create new ones, is in tune with a perspective of recognition of the regional histories and of knowing better the individual parts in order to transform or better recognize everything.

In this case, systematizations and reinterpretations of the habitational dynamic from the point of view of the existent housing and the results of new information are appreciated, where the environmental and climatic components have begun to have more weight than a simple cold description.

The promotion of archeometric investigations, above all in the field of ceramics, which intends to surpass critical or textural observations, which are the starting point of formal and typological estimates. Studies have been directed toward delimiting in detail the particularities of the technological process and pottery making itself, types of basic material and their sources, as well as the specific use of the recipients. In the latter, analysis of residual substances or of greasy acids on the exhumed pottery stands out, which contributes to a better certainty of the essential economic activities of the communities and the most common types of foods, etc.

In this same order—from the point of the archeometric determinants—archaeologists have sought to establish a direct relationship among the phases of pottery making, the expressions of its development in determined communities,

the origins of the industry, and its stratigraphic representation. Nonetheless, it compels us toward better corroborations and the examination of a wider array of samples. This type of analysis until now has had a limited regional projection or one of isolated settlements.

The studies of Physical Anthropology are summarized in the following watersheds:

1. Systematization of cultural features, and anthropologies of distinct regions with the aim of establishing a typology or a characterization of the forms of burial or interments according to the conditions, characteristics of the community, and the level of socioeconomic development. This has concentrated itself especially in the finding of new and important settlements' cemeteries like El Chorro of Maita, Cueva Calero, Canimar II, Marien II, etc.
2. The base study of the anthropological characteristics of the groups or communities called proto-agricultural and their comparison with the established series for the rest of the Cuban aboriginals (pre-agro-ceramic, agro-ceramic series).
3. The development of systematized investigations of aboriginal pathologies, such as their reoccurrence through observations in the context of cemeteries.

The aboriginal incidence in the processes of formation of the Cuban identity, where historic studies and documents are combined with the results of the archaeology. The most important cases are the investigations at the base of the aboriginal ancestry of the Virgin of Charity (Virgen de Caridad) and the

reflections and search for the aboriginal component in some of the elements of popular Cuban religion.

Extension of archaeological studies with more effort toward the themes and humans groups with important involvement in the formation of Cuban culture. An example is the investigations about *cimmaronaje* (the process of running away) and its material remains, archaeology of coffee plantations promoted by French immigrants—Haitians—and archaeology oriented toward the restoration of historic monuments.

Deep study of key and exceptional settlements that provide information about the work in material determination, such as wood or the stone as well as about the systems of settlement and the types of abode employed. This is the case of the Los Buchillones settlement, located to the north of Vila Clara Province which have propitiated a replanting of the questions and migratory routes of the earlier appropriator communities of the Seboruco-Mordan type.

The replanting of some themes with new lenses, which is the case of the

groups or communities defined as proto-agricultural, about which their has been initiated a critical and fruitful revision of the information that proceeds until arriving at the analysis of matrixes and regional contexts as well as the components of their archaeological registers.

To increase the number of dates or facts of the existing chronology, which is not only important for a valorization of Cuba but also is an essential element in the comparison and in the insertion of it into the Caribbean context, especially in the Antilles.

Displacement from an orthodox Marxist position toward a theoretically open position and the assimilation of the results of other archaeological foci or theories. Nonetheless, in our judgment, Cuban archaeology is heading toward a focus that more overlaps or connects with the Caribbean and its interpretations, is breaking or jumping out of institutional isolation but also interpretative in the relation of the phenomena and in the analysis of its communities.

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CITATIONS

Please cite this article as follows:

Ulloa, Jorge. (2002). Archaeology and Rescue of the Aboriginal Presence in Cuba and the Caribbean. *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology* [On-line Journal], Special Issue, Lynne Guitar, Ed. Available at: <http://www.kacike.org/UlloaEnglish.pdf> [Date of access: Day, Month, Year].