

Beyond the Myth of Extinction: The Hatuey Regiment

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Indios de Yateras

Martí, as always, guides our steps.

Four hundred years after the supposed “extinction” of Cuban Indians, in a regiment made up of people from the Yateras Valley of Guantanamo, in eastern Cuba, Taíno-descendants fought the Spanish colonial government under the famous Cuban patriot, Major General Antonio Maceo. By all accounts the troop, organized as the Hatuey Regiment, fought valiantly in several engagements, most notably at the Battle of Sao del Indio, on August 31, 1895, as the War of Independence was launched by the Cuban nation in arms.¹[1]

Ignored by most researchers and written out of Cuban national histories throughout the twentieth century, it is nevertheless a fact that Cuban Indians fought first for the Spanish army and then for the insurrection during the Cuban War of Independence of 1895. [2]

The questions of how to assail the Indian support for the Spanish militias and how to form alliance with the Indo-Cuban community was an important one for the early insurrection. By April, 1895, the “terrible Indians of Yateras” were already a scourge on the Liberation army, as they were expert trackers and intensely well disciplined mountain fighters. As a force for the Spanish, the Yateras Indians could control the important eastern trade area of Guantanamo-Santiago de Cuba. To disable the Indian community as a fighting force seemed an unenviable, formidable task to the Liberation forces as the Cuban War of Independence got underway in 1895. [3]

A number of Indian scouts from the municipality of Yateras, near Guantanamo, were recruited by the Spanish army into a group commanded by the infamous local leader of Spanish volunteers, Pedro Garrido Romero. With its Indian scouts from the area of Caridad de los Indios, a long-standing Taíno enclave, this particular Spanish group was deadly effective.² In mid-April, shortly after they landed to launch the insurrection, two of the Maceo brothers (Antonio and José) were ambushed and nearly destroyed by the Yateras Indians under Garrido. A third Cuban insurrectionist general, Flor Crombet, who landed with the Maceos, was killed in this ambush and the Garrido trackers kept up a tremendous pressure against the incipient Cuban army.³[4]

José Martí, the Cuban Apostle, poet and revolutionary leader, noted the sad reality of Indians scouting for the Spanish in his final campaign diary. Martí, who had landed with Maximo Gomez in the same region and was also traversing the eastern fields of battle, writes about being tracked by “...the Indians of Garrido ... the danger is felt. Since the

Palenque, they have been closely following our prints.”⁴ In this area of the Sierra, at least two of the turn of the twentieth century’s chroniclers of the insurrection beside Martí — Casasús and Miro Argenter — make occasional references to the Indian population. More recent historians, Guantanamo’s Sanchez Guerra most notably, have brought out important articles about the genesis of the Hatuey Regiment. [5]

Shortly before he is killed by Spanish bullets, José Martí spends a night in an Indian bohío. He writes in his campaign diary about his native host, Domitila, “Indian woman, ardent eyes, agile and good ... jumps to the forest and brings in a garden of tomatoes, coriander, oregano, herbs...” “Could it be true,” he also writes, upon hearing of the ambush against the Maceos, “that Flor Crombet, Flor the gallant, is dead? ... that the Indians of Garrido caused the treason?”⁵[6]

Martí is killed on May 19, 1895, but not before requesting from the Maceo brothers, both leaders of sizable armies, that they do everything possible to recruit the Yateras Indian trackers away from serving with the Spanish. How the Yateras Indians were recruited away from serving the Spanish army as guides and guerrillas is most interesting. General José Maceo here relied on two trusted men and one woman, all enjoying close relations with the Taíno-descendant communities in the mountains north of Guantanamo. The men were Pedro (Periquito/Little Parrot) Perez y Perez and Silverio Guerra Tellez; the woman was the heroine captain of Maceo’s eastern army, the midwife and spiritist, Cristina Perez Perez.⁶[7]

Trance of the Midwife

Cristina Perez, a midwife of Catalán ancestry but married into an Indian clan via her union to the minor cacique Ramon Ramirez Suarez, was a strong sympathizer with the Cuban cause. She was a collaborator against Spain via her close friendship to young Silverio Guerra Tellez, an Indian descendent from Yateras who would become a commander of the Liberation Army. Throughout late March and April of 1895, Cristina spoke with the major and minor caciques of the indo-Cuban population. Many were already allied to the Spanish army, which had granted them new concessions of lands, in the effort to enlist them. It was during this time, April 10, that the Maceo brothers were attacked by the Indian troops and General Flor Crombet shot to death by a young Indian scout named Guadalupe Ramirez Rojas (Rojitas). This was a dangerous period for Cristina, who anticipated attacks on her person by the Spanish volunteers, along with their many Indian allies. Only her circle of respect as an appreciated midwife of the mountain and her remarkable powers of ceremony, during which sessions she entered trances and spoke with the ancient *cemis* and long-gone caciques, protected her. [8]

By late April and early May, Cristina convinced two of the lesser caciques and one main cacique of the community of the justice of the Cuban cause. But many others were not convinced and the threats of death continued, as did the warnings to Cristina by friends to desist in her mission and leave the area. It was then that, at the invitation of the caciques, Cristina decided to hold her ceremony, inviting all caciques and main leaders, where she would decipher the wishes of the ancients through her trance. [9]

On the night of May 13, 1895, by the light of an open fire, the ceremony is conducted. An eyewitness, Dr. Luis Morlote, noted her words, which are cited by historian Sanchez Guerra: "Listen," she said in her trance to the assembled chiefs. It was the voice of an ancient cacique speaking: "In the great timepiece of the universe, it is signaled that the hour of Cuban national independence is at hand. Only a few leagues from here one of the most famous generals of the liberation war is encamped, the great Antonio Maceo. I am with him, and since you are with me, I request that, fortified by the memory of the persecutions felt by our victimized race, instead of continuing to war against him, you join his forces, brave and decided, to struggle for the redemption of Cuba, your country, because the hour is near and it is necessary that Cuba be free." [10]

The caciques retired to the mountain for an all night meeting with their people. Cristina waited in a local bohio, fearing the worst, perhaps even execution, if the Yateras Indians decided against her intent. The knock came at daybreak. The caciques were ready with an answer: their contingents lined up before Cristina, armed and ready to join the revolution. Within forty eight hours, they were at the camp of Antonio Maceo, some taking part immediately in the Battle of El Jobito on May 15th and constituting a remarkable addition to the Liberation Army until 1898, when the war ended. Both Cristina Perez and her husband Ramon Ramirez received the rank of captain. In a letter dated July 21, 1895, José Maceo writes to insurrectionist junta treasurer, Benjamin Guerra, in New York, that the Indians of Yateras have passed into the insurrectionist ranks. ⁷[11]

Sao del Indio

Naturally, the Yateras combatants would be incorporated into a Regimiento Hatuey, claiming the name of the first rebel Taíno cacique in Cuba, who was executed by the Spanish in 1513. ⁸ The name had yet to be formalized as a regiment, however, when under the command of the Dominican rebel officer, Dionicio Gil, and with the young Lieutenant Silverio Guerra incorporated into its ranks, the group fought in the important battle of Sao del Indio, August 31, 1895. The Indian group from Yateras mountains, the Ramirez and Rojas clans, as well as other descendant families, marched with the Pineda Regiment, later the Hatuey, under which command it entered that pivotal conflict of the early war that became known as the Battle of Sao del Indio. ⁹[12]

The Indian Regiment was one of several dozen to fight under Jose's illustrious warrior brother, Antonio Maceo, the loved "Bronze Titan" of the Cuban forces. General Antonio, whose army numbered some six hundred armed men at that time, was in operations near Santiago de Cuba in late August, 1895, when he received word that some twelve hundred Spanish troops with two pieces of artillery had his brother, General José and thirty men, besieged near Guantanamo. Antonio ordered a forty-mile overnight march through the mountains and arrived early next morning as the Spanish began their attack. ¹⁰[13]

The Battle of Sao del Indio lasted thirty six hours. The Cuban troops, fighting on empty stomachs and after the grueling sleepless overnight trek, charged on horseback with swinging machetes against Spanish cannon and infantry. Two long Spanish cannons took their toll with twenty-three well-placed shots. Antonio Maceo ordered Commander Gil

and the emerging Hatuey Regiment to take the Spanish artillery, which they did with a machete charge that drove off the battery crews. Padrón Valdes, 217: “The Hatuey regiment attacked from the right flank ... composed in its majority by the aboriginal guerrillas of Yateras, who with their arms had crossed over to our side ... ” [14]

Numbering about one hundred men at this time, the Hatuey regiment tied ropes to the cannons, attempting to pull them out in the heavy mud. It proved an impossible task and the regiment was pinned down while defending the artillery pieces most of the day. . It suffered heavy losses. “These guerrillas behaved heroically in their debut as patriots ... they eliminated the cannon crews and took the cannon, but could not move them from their place, which gave the Spanish troops time to reinforce the area ... [the] reinforcements decimated the Hatuey regiment ... until el General Jose could see what was going on and ordered help by forcing that enemy flank to retreat to its center ... ” (Padrón Valdes, 218). The battle produced 327 Spanish dead and some forty Cuban dead.¹¹[15]

Survivors of the Battle of Sao del Indio, such as Lieutenant Silverio Guerra, born in Yateras, and others from the Hatuey regiment, continued to serve in the insurrectionist armies to the end of the war against Spain. Along with the engagement at Peralejo, the Battle of Sao del Indio was pivotal in the early building of confidence and discipline of the forces that would spearhead General Maceo’s grand campaign west to Habana over the next year. [16]

While a few of the Yateras combatants went west with Maceo’s historic campaign, the bulk of the Hatuey Regiment, under the direct comand of Silverio Guerra, sustained operations in the Guantanamo-Santiago de Cuba zone. Guerra had been selected for the western “invasion” by Maceo, but a serious battle wound in the Battle of Los Platanos (November, 1895), incapacitated him and he was in recovery as Maceo’s army got on its way. [17]

Nevertheless, Silverio Guerra’s service with the Indo-Cuban contingents of the Hatuey Regiment continued throughout the Liberation War. “The Colonel of the Mountains,” as he is known in his region of Guantanamo, and the Hatuey Regiment, participated in several other major assignments and battles to the end of the war in 1898. In March, 1896, the Hatuey regiment saved a crucial shipment of three thousand rifles that had landed on the coast to Spanish pursuit. In May, they defeated the forces of the dreaded Spanish commander Garrido. In July, they were at the side of General José Maceo as he was shot off his horse and killed in Loma del Gato. In October, in the Battle of Revancha de Romelié, the regiment, with their revered midwife Capitana Cristina fighting in the ranks, defeated a Spanish Volunteers Troop. [18]

The United States entered the war in 1898 and with the defeat of Spain only months later, the Liberation Army was confined to quarters near Guantanamo. It was not allowed to march into Santiago after the Spanish surrender. This undignified treatment from the American Army command created much resentment. Months passed before the Cuban

Army of Liberation was allowed to enter the city. Along with the rest of the Liberation Army, the Hatuey Regiment was disbanded in 1899. [19]

The Yateras Indian community has been documented by professor Manuel Rivero de la Calle (Havana) and others. There are other, less studied, enclaves of native population throughout eastern Cuba. In addition, the *guajiro* folk culture of Camagüey and Oriente regions is deeply steeped in Taíno traditions and culture. ¹²[20]

Among the Taíno descendants met by Rivero de la Calle in his earliest expeditions in 1964 was the elder Ladislao Rojas, known by his Indian relatives in the Guantanamo mountain community of Caridad de los Indios as “Cacique Ladislao.” Cacique Ladislao, photographed in 1964 at ninety-two years old and a grandfather of the present cacique, Francisco (Panchito) Ramirez, was a veteran of the War of Independence. Ladislao appears in Carlos Roloff’s registry of veterans from that war. [21]

The history, culture and identity of Indo-Cuban ancestry is certainly alive in the eastern mountains of Cuba. Erudites that casually use the word “extinction” when referring to our Taíno heritage should reconsider their incorrect denials of the Indian presence within the Cuban nation. As Martí wrote: “They should quiet, and learn.” [22]

NOTES

1 Abelardo Padrón Valdes, “El General José, Apuntes Biográficos,” Editorial de Arte y Literatura, Instituto Cubano del Libro, La Habana, 1973, Pp. 217-218

2 Manuel Rivero de la Calle, “Supervivencia de descendientes de Indoamericanos en la Zona de Yateras, Oriente,” Cuba Arqueológica, Editorial Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, 1978. Rivero amply documents the long-standing existence of the aboriginal population of the Yateras mountains.

3 Juan J.E. Casasús, “La Invasión: Estudio Crítico-Militar, Academia de la Historia y academia Militar de la República, La Habana, 1950. “En el ‘Alto palmarito,’ en un encuentro con los indios de Yateras ... perece ... Flor Crombet. ... Su matador, el indio Rojas de 17 años, a los pocos días se incorpora al Ejército Libertador.” P. 48-49

4 José Martí, Diario de Campaña, en “Martí En Los Campos de Cuba Libre,” por Rafael Lubian y Arias, 1982

5 José Miro Argenter, “Cronicas de la Guerra,” Instituto del Libro de la Habana, 1945, 1970. “A Crombet lo mataron los indios de Yateras, mientras defendía el campamento de José Maceo.” P. 33.

6 José Sánchez Guerra, “La Capitana del Regimiento Hatuey,” El Mar Y La Montaña, revista de Guantanamo, October 30, 1998, Pp. 48-53. In this excellent piece of original research, the official historian of Guantanamo details the story of Cristina Pérez.

7 L.Primelles La revolucion del '95, segun la correspondencia de la delegacion cubana en Nueva York, (Biblioteca Historica Cubana”), Tomo I, Editorial Habanera, La Habana

8 Bartolomé de las Casas, Brevisima Relacion de la Destruccion de las Indias. Fray las Casas recounts the heroics and execution of Hatuey, who became a major hero in Cuban history and whose legend sustains in a live spiritual tradition for people in the southeastern region of Cuba.

9 Major General Carlos Roloff Mialofsky, Indice Alfabético y Definiciones del Ejército Libertador de Cuba, Datos compilados y ordenados por el Inspector General del Ejército Libertador.Habana, Imprenta de Rambla y Bouza, 1901, lists a total of 81 Rojas and Ramirez that appear in the Hatuey Regiment, Pp. 74 .

10 Padrón Valdes, Pp. 217-218

11 Leopoldo Horrego Estuch, “Maceo: Heroe y Caracter,” La Milagrosa Imprenta, La habana, 1952, P. 212

12 Manuel Rivero de la Calle, “ Los Indios Cubanos de Yateras,” Cuba Arqueologica, Santiago de Cuba, 1978

Author

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