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## Introduction

The Antilles provide the setting of Christopher Columbus' arrival and the starting point for the conquest of a continent. All the history of the region is built and is engaged upon this supposed moment of glory. Its protagonists are the Spaniards, and its stage is a New World with a fast-disappearing mass of indigenous people. From here on, there is a before and an after that cannot be reconciled for many reasons, most important of which is the continuous omission in our history and social conscience of the indigenous people ("indigenes") and of their colonial expression, the "indio" (Indian). The reality of the social disintegration and the demographic disaster of the indigenous world is unquestionable. Also unquestionable is the present-day lack of a significant population component that is recognized as indigenous or that claims ancestry. However, the idea of a completely vanished indigenous human and cultural coterie is false, either imposed or exaggerated to question the methods and the Spanish colonial system or to sustain economic and political conveniences for the past five centuries.

The analysis of the processes of interaction between the indigenous population and the Spanish, and the effort of the former in a different and hostile environment, in which they had to assume and construct a new identity, is key to achieving a vision beyond this incomplete history. We know very little of the interaction process, except that it lasted longer than is usually supposed and was also more diverse and complex. This is so because the interaction was not limited to the experience of contact in circumstances of discovery or conquest, and the environment of economic exploitation was more than merely an indigenous demographic crisis. This indigene, later converted into Indian, found ways to reposition himself in the colonial universe and to reach the following centuries in a multiethnic and multicultural tangle, to which he contributed his traditional legacy and the result of his

adjustments to a new way of life. That these ultimate aspects are little recognized today has much to do with the interests of the dominators and their *criollo* descendants, and the ways in which the indigene was incorporated by others and/or was integrated through individual interests and perspectives into the colonial world.

To understand the complexity of the connection between the indigenous population and the Europeans, we have to escape the dependency on historical and ethnohistoric sources, a resource that many times is intended not only to assess the regional panorama at the moment of contact or in the following decades, but also to construct a vision of the pre-Columbian past. We have to abandon those traditional documentary searches that only seek the struggle of the colonists at the seat of the local oligarchy, the emergence of European powers and their dispute over loot and Spanish possessions, and the imperial attempt to organize a not-so-new world.<sup>1</sup> We must leave behind an archaeology that feels committed only to urban settings or to the millennia of precolonial history, an archaeology where the study of the interaction between indigenous and European groups rests on responses to incidental findings of Spanish materials in indigenous contexts, where interpretation sees only an early moment associated with acts of discovery or early colonial settlement, or where such situations are assessed as brief or of low impact due to the supposed poverty of the archaeological record generated by a society in demise.

This book reflects that effort for change and improvement, connecting histories in the task of confronting what we could call the colonial invisibility of the indigenes and the Indians and their lifeways. It centers on archaeology as a way of searching for more objective data, and a space for the integration of information generated by various disciplines from a critical and balanced perspective. It does this starting from the study of an exceptional archaeological context in northeast Cuba, the site of El Chorro de Maíta (Figure 1.1). Initially excavated between 1986 and 1988, it yields aspects of material culture quite uncommon in Antillean archaeological sites and has the only cemetery found among indigenous communities of *Agricultores Ceramistas* (Agricultural Ceramicists) in Cuba, recognized in the traditional Caribbean practice as *Táinos*.

The discovery of the cemetery, excavated with the best techniques available to Cuban archaeology of the time, was a scientific and cultural event. A museum was constructed on top of the cemetery, and it was declared a Cuban national heritage monument in 1991. The place became a symbol of the indigenous past and of Cuban culture, as well as a symbol for the in-

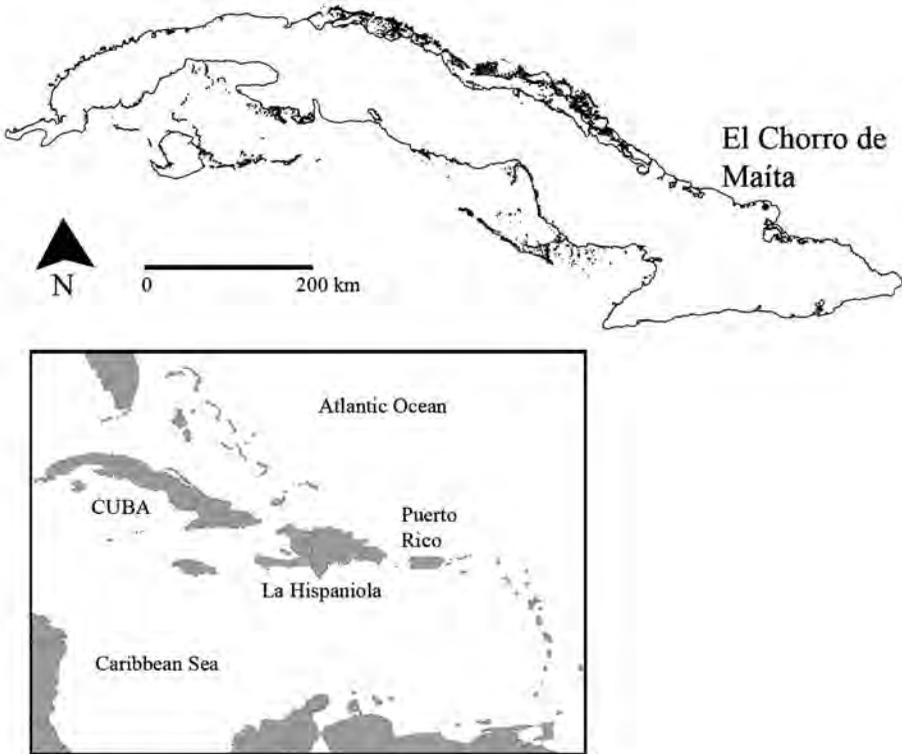


Figure 1.1. Map of Cuba and the Antilles showing the location of El Chorro de Maíta.

terest in recognizing and understanding Cuban cultural heritage. A vision was formed centered on the exceptionality of the cemetery, the artifacts, and the indications of cultural force and the social complexity of the indigenous community that lived there. This perspective was built on the information obtained in studies developed at the same time as the excavation process and the construction of the museum, concentrated on the human remains, the artifacts associated with them, and on a small zone outside of the funerary area. Unfortunately, in spite of the interests of the Cuban archaeological community, a large part of the archaeological evidence was not analyzed, and in the following years research at the site was stopped for diverse reasons.

European artifacts were found on the site, and some of the features of the burial practices and of the individuals were unique and striking, and all were uncommon in other indigenous communities. A link between them and the Spanish or with their material goods was recognized. However, the topic did not receive more attention or was handled as an aspect secondary to the preeminence of the indigenous cultural features and the requirements of the museum development. Due to misunderstanding or minimizing the impacts

of European contact, interpretations were proposed that we now know are erroneous.

Here, we contribute a new vision. This book exhibits the results obtained through many years of study to evaluate the processes of cultural interaction between the indigenes and the Spanish at the site. Part of this work is in understanding how the indigenous existence was expressed in colonial times, in terms of the link with other sociocultural groups, and evaluating the preservation and transformation of their modes of life and identity. Simultaneously, this investigation aims to identify and to study associated aspects of the action behind the interaction, exploring its significance in order to provide more insights into the “situation” in which it was produced, along with its particular features.

The site was in use for two centuries before the arrival of the Spanish. However, the site’s final chapter was greatly marked by the changes imposed by the colonial condition, resulting in one of the most extensive post-contact occupations, up to this moment, identified in the Caribbean. It has been determined that in the first half of the sixteenth century, a large part of the non-funerary zone must have been functioning under Spanish control, framed by transformation into an *encomendados* Indian town, a settlement obligated to servitude by the Spanish in supposed return for civilizing tutelage and Christian indoctrination.

The cemetery is the result of mortality during the colonial period, although we cannot exclude the possibility that some burials preceded the interaction. The conception of the cemetery is not indigenous, nor is it a typical Christian cemetery; it is one of the oldest syncretic funerary spaces investigated archaeologically in the American continent.<sup>2</sup> It houses the remains of indigenous people from Cuba and from non-Cuban areas, the remains of at least one African individual, and possible mestizos or individuals that include a non-indigenous ancestral component.

The *encomienda* is a system that has remained practically unstudied from the archaeological perspective in the Caribbean, and the ethno-demographic and territorial composition observed here, until now, had not been identified in indigenous sites or nonurban colonial spaces in the Antilles. In this case it is explained as a consequence of the inhumation of the commended (*encomendada*) population and of slaves of diverse territorial origin. The action of Christianizing certain individuals, some of them members of the indigenous elite, and the creation of colonial subjects is visible. In parallel, traditional practices were maintained, evidence of the active position of indigenes and Indians, also expressed in syncretic solutions. In this environment, a true

transcultural stage, new identities and individuals appeared, such as the Indians and possible *mestizos*; they embody the genetic and cultural mix that will mark the times to come, the future conformation of the Cuban ethos, and the emergent Caribbean personhood.

This investigation is a pioneering effort in the Caribbean based on many lines of analysis for the study of the cultural and physical evidence of regionally and ethnically diverse people brought together by the earliest Spanish labor regimes in America. In conceptual terms, it is one of the many possible approaches to life and death in colonial settings, outside of Spanish settlements, where archaeology is a true resource to envision other individuals and environments that are little recognized historically. This investigation informs us about ways to evaluate the indigenous locations and funerary contexts where the colonial materiality appears to be limited, but that could hide a very different reality. This example is very relevant not only because it uncovers a poorly studied human and cultural landscape but also because it demonstrates how the stage of indigenous world disintegration possesses the key to the analysis of its continuation.

## Conceptual Context of the Investigation

The definition of the situation that serves as the framework for the interaction between the indigenous population and Europeans is vital to interpreting this process. Words like *interaction*, *encounter*, or *contact* could become too neutral references, markers of a link but disconnected from the objective, characteristics, and consequences of the connection; they need to be put into context and embodied. The situations of interaction in a contact setting and a colonial environment are different (Hill 1998; Silliman 2005). Domination is the aspect from which the difference occurs. The loss of autonomy, of control over daily life and of spirituality, transforms the indigenous universe and projects the interaction in a plane that is very different from the link between autonomous entities, negotiating positions from their respective interests. In the Antillean case such situations are related to a particular chronology, specific to every island, and with the rhythm of Spanish incursion in the area and the occupation and control of territories. From such particularities this investigation assumes the model that considers domination as structuring the relationship between individuals and societies (Miller and Tilley 1984; Miller et al. 2005).

Although domination has been left at the sidelines in the discussion of contemporary theory, mainly in the postmodern vision, it remains pertinent