Explorers of the Caribbean: the taino people and their history - an original resource for social studies in upper elementary grades

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Explorers of the Caribbean: The taino people and their history –
An original resource for social studies in upper elementary grades.

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ABSTRACT

Explorers of the Caribbean: The taino people and their history – An original resource for social studies in upper elementary grades.

By Razi Abdur-Rahman

This thesis presents a study of taino history and society in the Caribbean for upper elementary grade levels. The taino people, apart from the Inuit of the Arctic regions of North America, were some of most accomplished maritime explorers during the pre-Columbian era. This thesis gives the reader an in-depth knowledge of the migrations of native peoples into the Caribbean basin, as well as an original narrative of how taino people left the South American mainland in hopes of exploring and resettling the Caribbean basin. The work and historical research included is meant to be a resource for elementary and middle school teachers looking to enrich or provide context for units on exploration of the Americas through a multicultural curricular framework. Sample lesson plans, annotated bibliography, glossary and original artwork included.
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I. Introduction
I. Introduction

A. Personal perspectives:

When I was six years old, my family moved from Sri Lanka (my mother’s homeland) to my paternal grandparents’ home in the town of Luquillo, east of San Juan. From earliest memories of elementary school, teachers inculcated the narrative, now contested, that Christopher Columbus had “discovered” Puerto Rico and the New World. We learned in class about his challenges in securing ships for his arduous voyage across the Atlantic, near mutiny by his crew, and his miraculous sighting of land in the Bahamas. We also learned that he accomplished something no other explorer of his time had achieved in discovering a whole new world. Our teacher told us very little about the native inhabitants, the tainos, just enough to get a sense that they weren’t as developed or sophisticated as Columbus and his Spanish crew. They were scantly dressed, lived in wooden huts, and lacked both iron weapons and written language.

It wasn’t until high school that I had a chance to read about the different perspectives on that first encounter between Columbus and the native taino people of the Caribbean Islands. A great sadness welled up in me because I felt the hopelessness of the taino struggle against the Spanish colonizers. The romanticized notion of first contact between a benevolent European explorer and first people he met quickly dissolved. At that point, I no longer viewed Columbus as solely an explorer, but I understood him as a colonizer.

What I found perplexing was that I was not exposed to these different perspectives when I was younger student in Puerto Rico. Prior to settling in Puerto Rico, I had lived with my mother’s family in Sri Lanka. My mother would tell me stories about the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, the Veddas or forest dwellers, and had a chance to visit some of their villages. We also visited countless Buddhist sites, as well as two of the former ancient capitals of the
Sinhalese rulers. She gave me a keen sense of the historical progression that had transformed the once virgin island into a civilization that produced unparalleled irrigation systems that are still present today. My grandfather educated me on the migrations of Tamils and Muslims, as well as the arrival of the European powers beginning with the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and finally culminating with the British.

Despite over 400 years of European colonial occupation, the faces of the people I saw as a child were Sri Lankan. The languages I heard were Sinhalese and Tamil along with English. I understood that the Sri Lankan people had lived side by side with their colonizers, some had intermarried, but the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim people had endured despite colonization. This was a stark contrast to what I saw in Puerto Rico, where initially to my knowledge most Puerto Ricans were either descended from Europeans and/or the intermarriage with enslaved Africans that were brought to the island as labor. The language that was spoken was Spanish and English, and nowhere did I see or hear taino characteristics or language, or so I thought.

The more I read and discovered about the taino, the more evident their influence became within the Puerto Rican culture. From foods that I ate to the words that were used in everyday language, the taino legacy was present. But why wasn’t it taught in the schools, and if it was being taught, why wasn’t it embraced with such importance or reverence? The Puerto Rican history that I learned in elementary school seemingly began with the arrival of the Spanish and the taino people were relegated to an almost footnote in the pre-history of the island. I learned that the tainos died from disease and inhospitable conditions subjected to them by Europeans. Within 30 years of the arrival of the Spanish, taino population had dwindled to barely a few hundred according to Spanish records (Las Casas, 1992). Thus, the taino contributions to
present-day Puerto Rican culture are largely glossed over in view of the more detailed African and European influences.

In the 1930’s and 1940’s, Irving Rouse and Jose Maria Cruxent conducted extensive digs at archeological sites on the island and in other parts of the Caribbean (Rouse, 1992). The research that followed led to a resurgence and awareness of the taíno people and their cultural legacy. In addition, there has always been a very small minority that has remained connected to their taíno identity. These like-minded and culturally connected Puerto Ricans have formed tribal groups both on the island, neighboring islands and within Puerto Rican communities in large US cities [see: www.smithsonianmag.com]. Through exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and personal research, more Puerto Ricans are learning about their connection to taíno culture. The majority of this discovery and learning occurs at the higher education level, and usually by those people that express an interest in taíno history.

As an educator who happens to be of Puerto Rican descent and who teaches in New York City, it is important that I share a different perspective of exploration in the Caribbean than what I had learned as a child. Third and fourth grade curriculums in the U.S. also convey the European perspective of the spirit of exploration and cross Atlantic migration. However, this mono-cultural, triumphalist narrative is a disservice to our young history students both from a cultural and historical perspective. Addressing this gap in curricular perspective is the focus of my thesis project.
B. Curricular framework:

The goal of a conscious and invested social studies teacher is to approach his/her craft from a multicultural perspective. James A. Banks (1998) suggests a five dimensional approach to teaching multicultural education. All teachers need to do three things and teach their students these three things, to know, to care, and to act. Dr. Banks describes multiculturalism’s five dimensions as being a foundation for any teacher, whether they are teaching math, science or social studies. The first dimension is content integration. Bringing taino people into the discussion about exploration and migration before the arrival of the Europeans builds the perspective of the original inhabitants of the Caribbean. The integration lays the foundation for the second dimension, knowledge construction, which helps students understand, investigate and begin to determine the implicit cultural assumptions by giving them examples and readings of taino people.

The two aforementioned dimensions allow for a space in which students can discover more about these early people, but it wouldn’t be complete without the third dimension, equity pedagogy. Teachers must change their teaching methods in order to enable students to learn better. It is not just a matter of giving new material, but changing the way that new material is introduced so that it is accessible to all the students in the class. This aspect can be difficult for a teacher because they have to understand the new material, making it engaging, and find a way in which they can make relevant in light of what is being studied.

The fourth dimension is prejudice reduction. While this can be challenging to some teachers and students alike due to reframing the taino and European encounter through critical historical approaches (which ultimately address issues of slavery and genocide in the New World) we must allow the students to make up their own ideas and assumptions without
impacting our own opinions. Most students will ultimately realize through their understanding of the texts, materials, and activities that Columbus was not the person they initially thought he was. They will also see the Taíno as a complex and complete group of people that explored the Caribbean. As a teacher our job is to present the information and let the children make their own assumptions based on the facts. The Zinn Educational Project (www.zinn.org) has a great activity titled: The People vs. Columbus, et al, in which the class is divided into five different groups each representing a side in the first contact meeting of Europeans and Taíno in the Caribbean. Each group must make a case for what they did. With engaging activities and discussions in both small and large groups, students open up and speak about how they feel about all the key historical protagonists. Ultimately after hearing to all the sides the students will have a richer and more complete frame of reference to base their opinions.

The fifth and last dimension to multicultural education is empowering the school and social structure. New York City has the largest Puerto Rican population outside of Puerto Rico, and if we are going to talk about Columbus and the conquistadors, then there has to be a dialogue in which the Taíno are included. Whether the school has a sizeable Puerto Rican or not, the role of the school is to push and challenge the educational boundaries by expanding the curriculum to include more perspectives and voices that aren’t always heard.

Exploration and migration was not unique to Europeans. It is part of the human experience, and every group that has existed has played a role in exploring the edges of their known world. Introducing students to the exploration and migration of the Taíno people enriches the culture of people of Puerto Rican descent, and it also speaks to other non-European groups of people that were responsible for exploring the boundaries of their world.
Introducing fourth graders to a multicultural education involving taino people and their exploration of the Caribbean sets the tone for other social studies units. By helping the students learn about exploration from a non-European perspective within the context of the Age of Exploration, they can look other contemporary migrations and empire expansions that were transpiring in South American (Incas), West Africa (Kingdom of Ghana), North Africa and the Middle East (Islamic Caliphates), and in Asia (Mongol and Mughal Empires.) Encouraging teachers and students to engage in multicultural perspectives will allow students to develop a keen sense of the different forces at play in each historic unit.

C. About the Art:

One of my inspirations for working on this project is the artwork from a series created over thirty years ago by my father Rashid Abdur-Rahman evoking taino perspectives of the island’s environment. It was through these sketches that I began further exploration into taino history and worldview. The series of thirty-three black and white, pen and ink drawings helped me visualize what taino way of life might have been like during pre-Columbian times.
II. Background/context
II. Background/context:

A. Historical overview of the taíno:

The migratory paths of early people have always been contingent on geography. They faced many challenges in the forms or rivers, open water, mountains, sweltering tropical jungles, arctic tundra and vast deserts, in addition to the dangers of the wild. For the early inhabitants crossing over during the last ice age into the western hemisphere was a slow migration. The voyage spanned over a thousand years for hunter gathers to reach South America. It was further millennia until these early hunter gathers evolved into more advanced agrarian societies and settled into diverse geographic areas within the South American continent.

There were necessary markers for these early societies to flourish. Familiarity with the terrain was crucial in finding suitable water source for both day to day living and supporting their nascent agriculture needs. The passing seasons brought about an understanding of their domain. They became acutely aware of the diversity of local flora and fauna. These early people may have been territorial, but were by no means sedentary. They maintained their semi-nomadic roots and were able to continue migrating should any pressures and hardships arose.

The South American continent contained many diverse biomes. With the exception of a few, water in the form of lakes, sea, or rivers was prevalent. As the early people grew more comfortable with their surroundings, so did their culture change. For the continents early inhabitants their mode of transportation was by foot, but as they settled close to waterways and the sea they developed the skills to build single man canoes. Due to the late development of seaworthy vessels, many of the off shore islands in the Caribbean basin remained uninhabited until about 4000 years ago.
The Caribbean Sea is a large body of water that spans 1500 miles from east to west and at least 350 miles from north to south. There are over a thousand islands strewn across the Caribbean Sea beginning off the coast of South America on the southeastern end and arcing northwest towards the US mainland. Today they are broken into two main categories, the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The Lesser Antilles is further differentiated by the Leeward Islands that face outwards to the Atlantic Ocean and the Windward Islands that curve into the Caribbean basin and off the coast of South America.

Some of the earliest archeological sites dating between 4000-2000 BCE are found in the Greater Antilles on the islands of Cuba, Haiti and to some extent in the Lesser Antilles. The early settlers into to the Caribbean islands can be broken into two distinct ages. The first age commencing around 4000 BCE is known as the Lithic. These early settlers were Paleo-Indians and were defined by their technological innovation of stone flaking. This technology was reminiscent of older archeological finds in Belize, Central America. This period was followed by the Archaic age, which began around 2000 BCE. The progression in technological innovation according to archeologists was the appearance of the grinding of stone, bone, and shell artifacts. Due to the types of artifacts found at various work sites in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic it is safe to assume that there was overlap between the Lithic and upper Archaic ages. Bone fragments found at the work sites included crocodile, whale, turtle, sloth, hutia (large rodent), lizard, snake, and mussel shells and food remains. These people were early hunter gathers that developed and crafted tools to be able to hunt both terrestrial and maritime species. Archeologists named these early Caribbean inhabitants, the Casimiroid Peoples and their reign spanned from 4000-400 BCE.
On the eastern end of the Caribbean a new group of people had begun to populate the island of Trinidad and Tobago around 2000 BCE. These new inhabitants were the Ortoiroid. They have come out of the Orinoco delta of Venezuela where they had developed a long history before the migrated into the Caribbean. The Ortoiroid people had a deep connection with both the Orinoco River and its delta that gave out into the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. Archeological site on the continent reveal both freshwater shells and seashells. The freshwater effluence of the Orinoco River produced the growth of seashells large enough that the Ortoiroid people were able to make tools and ornaments. They had developed the technology to create projectile points and barbs from bone and shell. The most distinctive was a bipointed barb that was affixed to hardwood spear, which would ensure deep penetration and become lodged. This would have been ideal for hunting large maritime prey such as sea turtles and manatees.

The Ortoiroid people differed from their western counterpart in a few important aspects. Firstly, the Ortoiroid territories were more connected with the sea and rivers, and did not favor the exploitation or exploration of terrestrial resources. They settled on the coasts and rarely made seasonal migrations inland as the Casimiroid did. Secondly, the Ortoiroid were limited by short coastlines of the smaller Leeward and Windward islands and therefore constrained their population growth. The Ortoiroid’s settlements being on the coasts were subjected to the elements, especially hurricanes, and were more intermittent and transient. Thirdly, Ortoiroid tools differed from Casimiroid tools in that there was very little flaking of flint. The grinding of their stone tools was primarily to make tools to use in making both bone and shell tools. Therefore, Ortoiroid artisans had no need to elaborate either their tools or the surfaces of their artifacts since their main concern was to improve the utility of their artifacts. Some archeologists
argue that the reason for this might have something to do with the irregularity of fine quality stone being present both in Trinidad and on some of the Windward and Leeward Islands (Rouse).

The transience of the Ortoiroid culture allowed it to spread westward along the smaller eastern islands. Within 1000 years they had reached Puerto Rico, and for the first time settled the island. Puerto Rico was the largest island the Ortoiroid had encountered since their exodus from Trinidad and Tobago. This was also the first time Ortoiroid people had come up against an established group of inhabitants. The Casimiroid people had settled and flourished on the large island that occupied both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The diffusion of Casimiroid culture began in Puerto Rico and spread to the eastern part of the Caribbean. The evidence shows Casimiroid tools, specifically the conical pestles were found as far as Trinidad and Antigua. This exchange of technology and culture would continue for the next 600 years until the appearance of another group of migrating people.

The Saladoids were a group of native people that originated in the interior of South America. Emerging from the Amazon River basin, the Saladoid people had evolved an agrarian component to their culture to supplement their hunting of game. They also developed the ability to craft pottery due their tropical jungle geology and proximity to fine river clay. They had transcended into their Ceramic age. Following tributaries of the Orinoco, the Saladoid people reached the delta, and encountered a group of coastal people. They suffused their culture artistically, technologically and linguistically with the coastal people. This merging of people created the subseries called Cedrosan Saladoid.

For 3000 years the Caribbean was populated by waves of Central and South American people. They traveled over open water from the Yucatan peninsula on the western end of the Caribbean Sea, and they migrated in a northwestern arc out of Venezuela and Trinidad. The
more agrarian Casimiroid people establish themselves in the larger western islands of Cuba, Haiti and Jamaica. While the seafaring Ortoiroid settled the Leeward and Windward Islands up to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The Mona Passage separating the western end of Puerto Rico from the eastern end of Hispaniola became the frontier for these two major groups. There was contact with these two groups of people and archeological dating of pottery and relics confirm that there was a diffusion of culture and technology. Neither group was able to usurp the others territory. This period lasted to about 500 BCE, when territorial dominance changed as the next wave of people flowed out of Venezuela and Trinidad.

The Cedrosan-Saladoids had heard about the current inhabitants of the Leeward and Windward Islands through trading. They heard about the countless islands and realized the potential that existed in them. The Cedrosian-Saladoids were adept maritime navigators having spent decades on the Venezuelan coast. They established themselves as the dominant group of people in the lower Caribbean. The Ortoiroid people were a coastal people living primarily of the bounty of the sea and had done little to take advantage of the terrestrial resources of the islands. The Cedrosan-Saladoid people were skilled agriculturists that brought along their knowledge and crops, as well as their ceramic making technology. In less that a 1000 years they had successfully spread from Trinidad to the Virgin Islands and the Eastern end of Puerto Rico. Once again traveling beyond Puerto Rico proved to be as difficult as it was for the Ortoiroid people before them. The size of Puerto Rico with its rich terrestrial resources might have naturally slowed their rapid expansion. Nevertheless, their migration had been swift and they had spread so widely as a people that there was very little interaction between the Cedrosan-Saladoid people.

Archeologists have been able to categorize the Cedrosan-Saladoid people into four regions. There is the Mainland, where the Cedrosan-Saladoid people occupied the high land
surrounding the Orinoco Delta. The Windward Islands, which succeeded in branching into two series of cultures before merging into the Island-Carib culture. The Leeward and Virgin Islands in which the Cedrosan-Saladoid had jointly developed a new Ostionoid culture due to its isolation from the other regions. The Elenan culture was influenced by the Chican cultures of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, which led to the rise of the protohistoric inhabitants that would later be classified as the Eastern Taínos. The Greater Antilles and the Bahamas where the Cedrosan-Saladoid people lived in the zone between the Ceramic and the archaic ages in Puerto Rico. They developed into an Ostionoid series that would later continue the Cedrosan-Saladoid migration across the Caribbean culminating on the eastern tip of Cuba. The series of people with the passage of time would splinter into two subseries, the Chican in the heartland and Meillacan in the western frontier, and a separate group that would become the Palmetto people that would populate the Bahamian Archipelago. The Chican people would become the descendant of the Classic Taínos, while the Meillacan and the Palmetto were the ancestral Western Taínos.

It is important to understand that the migration waves of the Saladoid and Ostionoid peoples are seen as a population movement -constituting a “repeopleling” (Rouse, 1992) of the Caribbean, and that it shouldn’t be confused with colonization and immigration. It was not the case of colonization in which the newcomers occupied a new area and left the dominant population to the rest of the land. Nor was it immigration in the sense that invaders arrive in small numbers and after some time they are absorbed into the local population. This was a case of population movement in which the invading people take over an entire area. Thereby replacing the previous inhabitants. Population movement is a territorial process very similar to waves that flood beaches, obliterates shoreline and then form new ones (Rouse).
As mentioned earlier, waves of new inhabitants into the Caribbean Basin from the east tended to halt their migration after reaching Puerto Rico. The circumstances for these “pauses” in their migratory tracks remain a point of discussion among archeologists. The Casimiroid cultures that established themselves in Hispaniola were deeply entrenched in their environment. They had established themselves as a culture with a greater dependence on terrestrial resources. The Ortoiroid culture was unsuccessful in attempting to cross the Mona Passage to reach Hispaniola. Had they managed, the Casimiroid people would have retreated to the interior if they weren’t able to expel the attackers. Ortoiroid population wasn’t as large as the more sedentary and agrarian Casimiroid people inhabiting Hispaniola. The Casimiroid would have had the upper ground literally with their lay of the land. The Mona Channel separated these two groups, a mere 20 miles of open water. This proximity did allow for trade and the diffusion of ceramics and stone based technologies that would later impact the early Taíno people, the Ostionoids.

Puerto Rico’s geography would play a major role in the first millennia in laying the early foundations of Taíno culture. Ostionoid culture grew out of the diffusion of art and technology from both the Cedrosan Saladoid and Casimiroid people before them. Ostionoid culture bloomed in Puerto Rico where numerous ceremonial and ball courts were built. One site in particular, Caguana, which is a national park today, contains 10 ceremonial and ball courts. There was a diffusion of these courts both east and west of Puerto Rico, but are not as numerous as there are in Puerto Rico and the eastern end of Hispaniola.

The rise in Ostionoid Taíno population was due to a number of factors. In Hispaniola the Taínos migrated inland to the more fertile central valleys. In Puerto Rico the migration was the opposite with groups expanding from the coastal plains to the beaches. Some experts believe
that this expansion was to fully exploit the shellfish and other fish along the coastal areas (Rouse, 1992). The rise in population was also attributed to advances in agriculture. The use of mounded agricultural fields (*canucos*) was believed to have originated in the north-central valley in Cibao in Hispaniola and later spread east and west to Puerto Rico and Cuba respectfully. The *canucos* were used to plant *cassava/yucca*, which preferred well-aerated soil. Though corn/maize was present within, the Taínos used it more as a vegetable than a staple crop. Thus, the possibility of having two staple crops was ruled out. This was also a period of relative calm, as there were no intrusions of people from either the eastern or the western frontiers.

The Central Ostionoid Peoples that would later be classified as the Classic Taínos populated the Greater Antilles from 600-1500 AD. The Eastern Ostionoid Peoples settled east of Puerto Rico, encompassing the Virgin Islands and rest of the Windward Islands during that same time span. For five hundred years from 1000-1500, Taíno culture flourished.

At the height of their civilization, shortly before the arrival of the Europeans, Taíno people had made great advances in agriculture, maritime technology and navigation, both religious and secular art, and developed a loosely centralized government ruled by regional chiefs. They built villages that consisted of hurricane-resistant *bohios* and *caneys* made of wood, thatch and mud. They also build public structures, which include elaborate and specialized ball and dance courts. The dance and ball courts were sometimes surrounded with boulders or slabs decorated with petroglyphs portraying zemis. Ball games were played with a dense rubber ball made of collected latex. Games consisted of two teams adorned with waist, elbow and ankle guards. What isn’t known is whether the games were actually played or just practiced in these ball courts. Evidence does suggest that ball courts and games were widespread with the Hohokam in southwestern United States, the Maya in the Yucatan, and the Ostionoids in the
Caribbean all built ball courts (Rouse, 1992). It remains unclear as to the rules of the game since Ostionoid Taínos were eradicated before proper documentation of this practice.

For at least 500 years the taino people flourished by creating a complex society with organized social hierarchy, religious and secular art, a vast knowledge on agriculture and pharmacopeia, and an assortment of rituals and ceremonies to commemorate their way of life. Because of the cataclysmic events that began in 1492, the trajectory of their development is difficult to pinpoint. Over the past 100 years archeologists and historians studied sites, artifacts, along with historical, linguistic and most recently mitochondrial data to present a more complete picture of the taino People and their legacy. Chapter Three, My Story, will showcase the taino people of Puerto Rico as preeminent explorers of the Caribbean.

B. Books and selected resources:

Approaching the subject of taino explorers cannot be undertaken unless there is an understanding of what were the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Below is a list of books that can help build a valuable knowledge base for any social studies teacher attempting to help their students learn about the taínos, and the “New World” before the arrival of Europeans.

1491: New revelations of the Americas before Columbus by Charles C. Mann delves into what were the Americas like before the arrival of Columbus. He engages the reader with this fluid and fascinating narrative about how the Native Americans developed uninfluenced by the rest of the world. They were responsible for great advancements among the myriad cultures that emerged over more than 10,000 years of exploration and migration in the Americas. He also demystifies some of the notions of Native Americans threading lightly on the land they lived on. The truth is that while they live within the graces of nature, they were responsible to shaping
their environment particularly through agriculture and architecture.

The author reveals that before the 16th Century, the population of the Americas may have been as many as 90 million to 112 million people. These people were incredibly diverse, as different as Turks and Swedes (Mann, 2007). People developed under diverse environmental conditions ranging from the humid jungles of the Amazon basin to the highland of Peru and to the frigid arctic and the bucolic prairies. However, the arrival of the Europeans changed everything, more than 95 percent of the native population succumbed to disease, most smallpox. This decimation of human life would account for one-fifth of the entire world population. By the time successive waves of Europeans arrived on the shore of the Americas, they found not the great gardeners and architects, but mere remnants of what was once a thriving mass of people.

In *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, Charles C. Mann continues where he left off in his aforementioned book. Although the book is an entertaining read, the first few chapters are more relevant within the context of early exploration by European. The arrival of Europeans unwittingly shaped the continent through the introduction of new wildlife and microbes; and mass enslavement of indigenous populations, later augmented by the importation of peoples from Africa (see Diamond, 1997). The Columbian Exchange, Mann argues, was the beginning of contemporary globalization. The encounter brought about economic gains offset by ecological imbalance and social tumult still felt today throughout the continent.

The most comprehensive book on the people that explored and settled the Caribbean is *The Tainos: Rise and decline of the people who greeted Columbus* by Irving Rouse. Beginning in 1930 as an undergraduate student at Yale until his death at age 92 as a professor emeritus of anthropology he studied the taino people. His fascination with taxonomy and his exposure to linguistic anthropology led him to focus on pottery classification and prehistory systematics of
the taino and their origins. Rouse carefully lays out a logical progression of how the tainos came to be. He guides the reader through the chronology of the peopling of the Caribbean basin. Beginning with stone age hunter-gatherers and culminating with the rise and fall of the tainos.

The first four chapters of *Columbus’s Outpost Among the Tainos: Spain and America at La Isabela, 1493-1498* by Kathleen Deagan and Jose Maria Cruxent give an accurate account of the events that unfolded on the island of Haiti (Dominican Republic) after the arrival of Columbus. Deagan and Cruxent combine a readable prose infused with a plethora of detail from Taino life and social life to the struggles of Columbus’s Spanish crew. Chapter two, *The Historical Setting*, retraces the series of events that led to Columbus being granted the opportunity to “discover” a western route to Asia by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela. Chapter three, *Reluctant Hosts: the Tainos of Hispaniola*, richly details Taino life and the change that occurred with the establishment of a permanent Spanish settlement of *La Isabela* on the island of Hispaniola.

Deagan and Cruxent skillfully blend together historical first hand accounts by Bartolome De Las Casas and decades of Cruxent’s archeological data to render a complete picture of what transpired within those first five years of the Spanish presence on the island of Hispaniola in chapter four. While the rest of the chapter are interesting, the first four serve to give any teacher a greater understanding of the interaction between the Taino people and the first Spanish settlers to land on the island of Hispaniola.

The final book, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* by Bartolome De Las Casas is the only first hand account among the five books presented. De Las Casas was a Jesuit that was curious about what people Columbus and his sailors would find on his travels. He was
also interested in bringing the teaching of his Jesuit order to any people that he might encounter. There was a religious component to early European exploration, and it was often with the church’s blessing that these early explorers set off on their long and arduous journeys.

De Las Casas was in his early 20’s when he landed in the new world, and he quickly realized that the power had corrupted Columbus’s ability to both lead and explore. Columbus had disobeyed the Queen’s orders that no native should be treated unjustly and they were all children of god, even if they hadn’t been converted yet. De Las Casas returned to Spain to report to his order, but he also spoke to his friends and others who were willing to listen. All of the people were shocked by his accounts of Spanish abuse of the native population. They people he spoke to urged him to write down the incredible accounts.

Upon his return to the new world, he began to chronicle this downward spiral that began on the island of Hispaniola, but had quickly spread to the neighboring islands. Within a short period of time, his accounts had spread deep into the Royal court. Then Queen Isabela recalled Columbus and a court were set up to listen to his plea. De Las Casas was also asked to attend this trial and speak on behalf of the native people and describe the actions perpetrated by Columbus and his men. The first thirty pages focus on the taínos. His writing in these sections focus on Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. The rest of the book explores all the other Spanish colonial territories in South America, Central America and even Florida.
III: Explorers of the Caribbean: An original curriculum resource
III. Explorers of the Caribbean: An original curriculum resource

A. Setting and Classroom:

In New York City, public and private schools students are exposed to social studies or history in concentric circles (Banks, 1998). A first grader might learn about the city within in a neighborhood study concentrating on a particular landmark like Central Park. It allows the young minds to physically grasp some of the history around them through self-discovery field trips and guided activities. A second grader might take this study further by investigating an entire city block, specifically around where they reside. Again, the focus is based on what can be made physically and intuitively accessible to their young minds. In studying their city blocks, the students might notice some of the social dynamics that make up living in a particular neighborhood like the people they see and what types of places exist and the interactions with everyone. The neighborhood study leads into historical units like the Brooklyn Bridge. Once again, it is a tangible concept within the grasp of all the students.

As a student moves into Third Grade, they are more cognitively developed and better able to understand the chronology of history. In most schools, students begin to learn about Native Americans. The Native Americans are discussed in some context with the advent of European exploration of the New World (see: www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html)

The narrative below is designed to give both the teacher and the students an alternative introduction into the Age of Exploration. It can be used in conjunction with the current unit of study to either compare and contrast with early European explorers or give a non-Eurocentric, more native perspective on early exploration.

The Age of Exploration, sometimes called the Age of Discovery usually begins with the earliest European exploration that leads into the colonial expansions into both the New and Old
World. Students learn about the colonization of Greenland and Iceland, as well as the Vikings sailing and exploring Vinland or Newfoundland in Canada. The students learn that the Vikings met the Native Americans and lived on their land for two years until their relationship soured and the Vikings left. The Vikings were the first Europeans to venture across the Atlantic in search of riches and new lands to conquer almost 500 years before Columbus.

Students could learn about exploration through a variety of sources beginning with the earliest migrations of humans across the Bering Strait to the Greeks and Romans in ancient times, to the seafaring Vikings. At some point they are introduced to the most famous explorer of them all, Marco Polo. All the while their exposure to exploration has come through the historical focus of European accounts.

The Americas were explored and populated by new people that came over a land bridge many thousands of years ago. They migrated over many millennia and settle every part of the new continent. Over time they evolve into myriad cultures, some sharing and other quite distinct from one another. If we are to study and teach history in the New World to young students, then it must begin with those people - the first to explore and create civilizations in the Americas.

B. My Story: Explorers of the Caribbean

Taino Explorers

Since the dawn of the Homo sapiens, people have spread across the world. Multiple factors led early people to explore. The search of food was constant, as agricultural practices had not been developed. Early hunter-gatherers were in constant pursuit of game to support their families. Geography also was another constant. Early people either adapted to their
environment or search for one that better suited their needs. The first people were explorers above all else. Every day was filled with exploration.

As millennia passed, early peoples settled in waves all over the planet, inhabiting a wide cross-section of biomes. This was a true testament to the adaptability of humans, the resourcefulness that groups of people in diverse situations have shown. The exploration of the Caribbean and the eventual settlement in Puerto Rico by the taino is one of those stories.

What went through the minds of the early of the people coming into the Caribbean Basin? Traveling over land had always given early explores physically tangible landmarks to venture out and discover. Traveling for miles on foot enabled the explorer to take in the world around them and make mental notes of physical marker such as, rock, trees, clearings, streams, hills and mountains. The coast areas became an interesting juxtaposition between two physical expanses, one solid and firm under their feet and the other aqueous, seemingly infinite and unknown.

That first person standing on the northern shore of Trinidad had to peer far into the horizon in search of some land. There would be nothing to catch his or her eye but open water. Those people that traveled and settled Trinidad had originally come from the Amazon, and they themselves had made a maritime jump into the Caribbean hundreds of years earlier. Trinidad would have been visible to them from the coast, and therefore was a realistic goal that would have been achieved in a long day of paddling.

After a few centuries of living on Trinidad, the desire to travel propelled by the thirst of exploration and the necessity of new resources must have pushed some to peer deeper and farther into the horizon. The idea that there was something out there might have come from their collective mythology, or it might have come from their oral history of how they had been driven
to explore the Orinoco River and travel down to its delta. Perhaps it was this same spirit of exploration that manifested in that first person to peer out into the northern horizon.

The people living on the coast might have had some idea there was land out there. They would have noticed migratory birds or even floating detritus after a hurricane that would have signaled that these plants and birds came from a not so distant land beyond the horizon. Knowing that there might be land over the horizon and being able to reach it was fraught with a multitude of problems. These proto-taino needed maritime vessels that could travel across open water. River going and coastal canoes were not adapted to open water even with the most experienced navigator. Sea going vessels needed to be both large enough to carry a contingent of explorers and supplies. The sea vessels also need to be seaworthy and stable in unknown weather conditions. They build solid canoes from the largest trunks of indigenous trees. Without metal tools, proto-tainos had to use stone axes and fire to hollow out canoes that would be large enough to carry over fifty people.

Having built the necessary seaworthy canoes it would have been a monumental challenge for those early explorers. Looking out into the sea, the first group had no idea what their voyage would be like. Little did they know that their voyage would cover eighty miles of open water. They would have had to quickly assess wind conditions, as well as the currents where the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea met. Eighty miles of paddling in a large dugout canoe was no easy feat. It would have taken them many days, maybe over a week through those unknown water to reach the island of Grenada.

On Grenada, the pre-tainos found an island replete with natural resources. The island had rich volcanic soil that would have been ideal planting maize and their staple crop of cassava. Grenada had high central mountains with the highest peak rising to slightly over 2,700 feet.
Small rivers and waterfalls would have been encountered upon further exploration of the interior of the island. Indeed, this would have been an idyllic find for these early explorers that had travelled farther over the open water than any of their people before them. The natural resources present would have easily sustained a sizeable population. The discovery of Grenada confirmed to these early explorers that there were more islands to travel to in the Caribbean Sea.

These new explorers, the seafaring pre-Taíno began a slow and steady arc of explorations through the windward and Leeward islands in the Caribbean. Their combined knowledge of maritime and terrestrial resources, as well little resistance from previous inhabitants allowed for a fruition of their culture and society. The geography of the Caribbean islands differed both geographically and climatologically. Unfortunately, not all off the islands could sustain a growing population. The smaller islands often lacked sufficient freshwater and an ecosystem that could contain seasonal rainfall. The leaving the inhabitants to rely on collected rainwater. These windswept arid islands while capable of sustaining indigenous flora that had adapted over millennia were incapable of yielding any of the crops they had brought along with them. While these smaller islands might have remained valuable fishing grounds for the pre-Taínos, they continued in search for islands with the potential for permanent settlement. Generations passed as they followed a northwesterly arc through the Caribbean islands.

Geographically, this migration was simple due to the close proximity of the islands. Most of the islands were visible by peering out on the horizon, but not all. By the time they reached the islands of St. Kitts & Nevis and Anguilla the islands on the horizon disappeared. Once again the pre-Taínos were faced with an expanse of water very similar to what their ancestors had faced of the coast of Trinidad centuries ago. For these more seasoned maritime explorers fifty miles of open water was probably less challenging. By now they had become accustomed to the
seasons, watching as Juracan would call up the great tempest of winds and rains that would begin in the east and travel west in the late summer months. They would have learned that east to west travel was easier due to the ocean and sea currents. The pre-Taínos noticed that the sizes of the islands had diminished over the last leg of their journey, and they would have had to push on in hope to find a larger island that could meet their needs.

Sailing from Anguilla the pre-Taínos encountered a few small islands in what today are the British and U.S. Virgin Islands before moving further west. A forty-mile voyage further with a possible break in journey in Culebra would have brought them close enough to see an island on their western horizon. This island loomed on the horizon and with every stroke of their oars brought these new explorers closer.

Arriving from the northeastern end of the island, yellow sand beaches were visible for miles. The beaches gave way to lush greenery that spread as far as the eye could see. But the most impressive sight were the mountains that seem to erupt from behind the greenery. These were similar to some of the other tall peaks their ancestors had discovered as they traced their way up the Leeward and Windward islands.

*Courtesy Rashid Abdur-Rahman 2014*
The new explorers hugged the coastline searching for a suitable landing point. Mile after mile of following the coastline they quickly realized that this new island was larger than any they had encountered. The mountains that rose from the rolling hills behind shoreline kept pace with their canoe. They found a river that flowed into the sea and thought this might be a good place to come ashore.

Over time these pre-tainos grew accustomed to all the large island had to offer. Living on the coastal plain had many advantages. The fertile soil was perfectly adapted to growing cassava/yucca, corn and sweet potatoes. The close proximity to the sea enabled them to take advantage of the maritime bounty. Tainos became adept fisherman being able to fish in the diverse habitats along the coastal lagoons and mangroves, as well as the open sea. Fish, crabs and mollusks meshed beautifully with the corn, sweet potatoes and indigenous tubers. They also grew chilies and onions, which were used to flavor stews. No food crop was more important than the cultivation of cassava. They built canucos, large mounds as tall as a man and twice as wide, which created perfectly aerated soil for cassava cultivation. Cassava was the centerpiece for their cuisine, and they even had a god that watched over the cultivation, Yucahu. Not only was Yucahu the god of yucca, but also the god of the sea. Where as previous people relied either terrestrial or maritime resources for food, the tainos had truly developed a balance. Yucahu became one of the most important and powerful gods in the eastern part of Borinquen/Puerto Rico. El Yunque, the mountains they first saw and now watch over them became Yucahu’s home.

El Yunque was a multifaceted area for the tainos of the eastern end of the island. As a rainforest it supplied the purest fresh water on the island. Thousands of streams and waterfalls
provided the tainos with freshwater fish and crustaceans, as well as spiritual places for
meditation and communing with nature. The rainforest was home to countless species of bird,
reptiles and small mammals, which could be hunted to supplement the protein in their diet. El
Yunque also provided them with caves, which served as emergency shelter when Guanabex,
goddess of the hurricane would hurl her violent storms towards the island.

Due to the diverse flora found in the rainforest and on the coastal plain, the tainos
developed an extensive knowledge and use of local pharmacopeia. The bohiques or taino
medicine men, learned to extract medicinal compounds from plants that were used for beneficial
purposes. Poisonous juices of the cassava were cooked down to create delicious sauces. They
sometimes crushed shrubs to release a poison into the waters to stun fish in the mangrove and
estuarine areas. Bohiques discovered that grinding up the cohoba seeds and inhaling them gave
them powerful visions and aided both themselves and the caciques, their chiefs on their vision
quests.

The pre-taino explorers found a plethora of resources in Borinquen. The bounty of the
sea coupled with ample crops being yielded by the fertile land seemingly slowed their desire to
continue exploring other islands further west. Twenty miles separated Borinquen from Haiti
(Hispaniola) where another population of natives had settled centuries before. The pre-tainos
learned of these other people through failed attempts of conquest and eventually mutual trade.

The Saladoid-Cedrosan pre-tainos settled throughout Borinquen. They encountered little
resistance from the island’s previous inhabitants as they spread out over the island. They settled
in areas they felt were conducive for hunting, farming, fishing and trade. Over time these pre-
tainos became the classic tainos. Tainos built yucayeques or villages that were always close to a
water source. These yucayeques were comprised of bohios, circular houses with conical
thatched roofs. The cacique’s house or caney, was a larger rectangular house that could accommodate his many wives and an area to receive guests was at the center of the yucayeque. The caney was in close proximity to the batey or ceremonial ball court (Deagan & Cruxent, 2002). Each village included a ball court and some of the larger villages would have had two or more where they practiced and played games. Toward the outskirts of the yucayeques they cleared the land to create a series of canucos to plant their staple crop of yucca, as well as other vegetables and fruit bearing trees (Rouse, 1992).

The expansion of the Taíno people created changes in their society and culture. With proliferation of taíno people throughout the island, caciques carved out territories that were under their jurisdiction. The island became divided into 22 to 26 provinces governed by a head cacique. Within those provinces there were small districts led by a local caciques. The structure was that each village had a cacique or chief, and they would answer the cacique of the district and up the chain of command. The district caciques answered to the head cacique of the province and they in turn owed allegiance to head cacique as the paramount cacique of the island.

Taíno society was divided into two classes, the nitainos, who were nobles, craftsmen, artisans and warriors. Bohiques, shaman/healers were part of the nitaino class and often shared a close relationship with the cacique as a spiritual guide and counsel. The lower class or working class were the naborias, they were the laborers, fishermen, hunters and farmers (Jacobs, 1992).
As generations passed Taino culture flourished. The taino social and political complexity relied upon a system of intensive agriculture supplemented by abundant wild estuarine resource coupled with interregional trade. Much of their trade depended on water transport. The tainos were skilled seafarers that used the water for both trading and fishing along interisland routes.

The taino interisland trade allowed for the diffusion of taino culture throughout the Caribbean. These trade routes had begun centuries ago by the pre-taino explorers that plied the waterways between the islands. With the rapid expansion and exploration of the smaller Caribbean islands left small pockets of people that were able to coexist within their island habitat. These groups of people became the eastern tainos. Linguistically they were connected to their island neighbors, yet culturally they developed along their own lines. The populations in the smaller island became susceptible to new waves of expansion coming out of Trinidad and the mainland. The taino people had evolved into a relatively peaceful civilization. There were disputes and clashes between caciques, but these were often settled through third party mediation (paramount cacique), ball games, and intermarriage between the clans. The new waves of people expanding up the Caribbean were different, these people that would be known as the Caribs were
more aggressive and war-like. They began raiding the smaller islands for food, materials and people (Las Casas, 1992). The Taínos living on the larger islands were better able to defend and protect themselves from Caribs.

The Carib incursion was the first but not the last interaction the Taínos would have with another group of people. At the height of their society the taínos had settled all the major islands in the western Caribbean. Today historians can classify that there were three major groups of taínos, the western taínos who occupied Cuba, Jamaica and the islands of the Bahamas, the classic taínos of Haiti (Hispaniola) and Puerto Rico, and the eastern taínos of the US and British Virgin Islands down to Montserrat. The Caribs, who were encroaching on the eastern taínos, had fortified the control of the Windward Islands from Guadeloupe to Trinidad.

At the end of the 15th century, the taínos were at the most populous group of people in the Caribbean. Due to their advances in agriculture, bountiful resources from the sea and their robust interregional and interisland trade their numbers had swelled to over 3 million and possibly as much as 7 million. Most of this population was found on the larger islands they called Haiti (Hispaniola), Borinquen (Puerto Rico) and Cuba. The taínos were descendants of previous waves of people coming out of South America and the existing archaic groups that had come across from Central America. For millennia they had only know people that were similar to them, physically, socially and on some level linguistically. Towards the end of the 15th century that would all change for the taino people.

The People of Western Europe and the taínos were at the height of their respective civilizations. Europe had emerged from the Dark Ages, survived the Plague, and was well into the first century of its renaissance. In the same span of time, the Taínos had evolved into a
civilization with a complex religion and socio-economic structure. The meeting of these two cultures on October 12th, 1492 was to have a profound effect on both.

The arrival of the first Europeans in the Caribbean would prove to be a cataclysmic event for the taíno people. The first ships to appear on the horizon were unlike anything they had seen with large looming multileveled wooden vessels with tall white, billowing sails. The taínos being a complex and highly developed culture with a curious and noble nature watch from afar. These weren’t their enemies the Caribs, but something wholly different. As Columbus and his men landed the curious and friendly taínos greeted them. Columbus gave the taínos red caps, brass rings, tiny copper bells and glass beads as gifts. The taínos in return gifted him and his sailors’ skeins of cotton threads, darts, tamed parrots and food (Jacobs, 1992). At first contact the taínos must have been impressed with their new visitors. They were fully clothed, light skinned, some were blue-eyed and they bore gifts. On some intuitive level the taínos realized that these new men were explorers, but what they didn’t realize were how truly different they were.

Columbus, the Genovese explorer was searching for a western route to Asia. He had spent much of his early life learning everything there was to be known about cartography, sailing and trading. By the time he planned his trip to find the western passage to Asia, he had sailed extensively all around Europe and down to the west African coast where the Portuguese had established slave ports. For the European powers, exploration was a means to and end. Their goal was to secure new routes that would enable them to control trade and ultimate eliminate the middlemen and those that were the present traders.

The taínos had embraced exploration for different reasons. They explored and search the Caribbean islands for a new home. Once established they created mutual trading zones throughout the Caribbean. Tools made of stone; bone and shell were highly prized within the
The Taíno culture. The Taíno also created fine pottery with distinctive red and white designs. They wove *hamacas* or hammocks from the fibers of indigenous palm trees and cloth from cotton, which were traded with other islanders. Dried and smoked fish and meat was traded locally. Precious stones and gold were a rare among the Taíno. Most of the gold was traded and passed down through family members. The yellow metal was soft enough to shape into ornaments for their nose, ears and woven into belts. Gold however held a much higher value for the European that arrived on their shores.

Gold was the reigning currency in Europe and had been for well over a thousand years. Along with silver, gold became the currency of choice in the kingdoms across Europe. These European explorers were driven by the pursuit of these material riches, and initially not by the desire to relocate to new lands. The Taínos were driven by the need to find new resources to sustain their people living on small islands. There was no need for currency other that the necessary goods for survival, food, tools, pottery, and other surplus wares and items. For the Taínos, everyone worked and no matter what job you did, you were fed. Their society had evolved to encompass and account for each person, and they all had a sense of purpose within among themselves. This was a stark difference to life in Europe, which shared some level of social stratification, but where people were held responsible for finding their own jobs to make a living within the society. Thus, people in Europe became explorers in order to make money by discovering new lands and resources.

The cultural exchange that began between these two groups of explorers in 1492 was one-sided. The Europeans came with the intention to find riches, primarily spices, silk, pearls and other trade goods. The Taínos were a peaceful, curious and hospitable. The mutual exchange of small gifts convinced the Taínos that the Europeans were generous and visiting in good faith.
In reality Columbus and his men had risked their lives to traverse the Atlantic and were not going to return home without finding gold.

The next thirty years would prove disastrous for the taíno people. Columbus and his men set up a small outpost on Hispaniola, which was destroyed by the time of his return. This minor setback didn’t deter Columbus and every year after the swell of colonists would flow into Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Cuba. Taínos became the labor force under the Spanish encomienda system. Encomiendas were granted to each new settler where they were “given” depending on their wealth and status between 5 and 20 taínos. This was veiled slavery. The settler was responsible for clothing, feeding, teaching the taínos about Christianity, protect them from the ‘cannibal Caribs.” In return, the taínos worked the land and did other backbreaking labor for their new master.

The indentured servitude and ill treatment by the Spanish strained any future of a peaceful relationship between the taínos and the Spanish. The close proximity and every day contact to with the Spanish settlers were to have the most detrimental effect on the taíno people. Unbeknownst to the taíno people, the Spanish settlers carried with them a whole battery of germs of which the taínos had no immunity. The exposure to these new germs decimated most of the taíno populations on the islands. Within 30 years of the arrival of Columbus and his men, more than 90 percent of the taínos had perished.

Those taínos that survived moved further inland away from Spanish settlements in order to secure their survival. As the years went on the Spanish further encroached on taino land. In some cases there was intermarriage between the taínos and Spanish settlers, as well as escaped Africans. As time went by taino populations continued to decline, but some traditions continued within these new generations of Puerto Ricans that share their ancestor’s heritage.
If we listen closely to the Spanish being spoken, we can hear taino words that have been passed down over the past five centuries. The tainos and their way of life that Columbus first encountered five hundred years ago have disappeared, but the spirit and influence of those great people persists today. The tainos live on through the language; food and cultural remnants found within the Puerto Rican people today, and will hopefully continue to be passed on by those culturally conscious Puerto Ricans.

Second Reading

These new explorers, the seafaring pre-tainos began a slow and steady arc of exploration through the Windward and Leeward islands in the Caribbean. Their combined knowledge of maritime and terrestrial resources and little resistance from previous inhabitants allowed for a fruition in culture and society. Unfortunately, not all the islands in the Caribbean could sustain growing populations. The smaller islands often lacked sufficient freshwater, thus relying on collected rainwater. The geography of the Caribbean

Tainos people spread and became the dominant culture throughout the Caribbean. They settled on the lush islands in the western Caribbean and developed over a millennium and a half a culture rich in art, pottery, dance, music and food thrived. Due to their social and economic structure, they developed into a peaceful civilization. At the time of contact with Columbus and his Spanish crew, generosity and kindness were dominant values among the taino people.
The Taíno people Columbus first encountered in the Bahamas and later on the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico lived in harmony with their environment, and benefited from the fertile land and abundant resources of the sea. Not only was the land fertile for growing their crops, it contained valuable timber and palms that could be used to build canoes, houses and fibers for weaving. They could build a dwelling from a single Royal Palm tree (Barreiro, 1990). An entire Ceiba tree could be carved out to make a canoe that could hold up to 100 people. The Taíno grew cotton, which they used for simple weaving naguas or a simple skirt that was worn by married women. They wove mats, hammocks and numerous fiber ropes. The Taínos lived a simple life that revolved around cultivation of crops, fishing and recreation.

The Taíno people lived in small, clean yucayeques or villages comprised of bohios and caneys, thatch dwellings/house along rivers inland and on the coasts. The bohios and caneys were made from the trunks of local palm trees, palm fibers to attach posts, and they used the palm fronds/leaves to make thatch roofs. They were a handsome people with olive-brown skin.
and who had no need of clothing in the warm tropical climate. They were a cleanly people that liked to bathe often.

From all early descriptions of the Spanish, the Taínos were a healthy people and showed no signs of malnutrition from hunger or want. The Spanish sailors saw large fields of crops that were alien to them. They would come to learn about the corn, manioc, beans, and fruit orchards covering whole valleys. As they walked through the bateys or town squares of villages, all recently swept clean, where they saw many kinds of drying tubers/root vegetables, beans and herbs, and protected storage sheds with shelves packed with thousands of dried cassava cakes.

Taíno women and some of the men harvested corn, peanuts, cassava, and other roots vegetables. The taínos appear to have practiced a rotation method in their agriculture, moving their crops to different parts of the field every season. Boys hunted fowl from flocks and by using tame parrots to capture wild ones. The men waded through rivers to fish and hunt for iguanas and hutias, rabbit-sized rodent. They also braved the sea to hunt and fish for the succulent manatee, giant sea turtles and countless species of other fish and shellfish. The Spanish might have noticed around every house, there were flocks of tame ducks that the people roasted and ate.

The taínos organized system of food production and they highly valued feeding everyone in their community. A telling event occurred when the Spanish were pressing against Indians in eastern Hispaniola where Guarionex was leader. His territory was highly esteemed for its agricultural productivity. In 1494–95, after Columbus imposed a tribute of gold to be paid by every taino man, woman or child over the age of 14, Guarionex went to the first colonizer with a counter offer (Barreiro, 1990).
Guarionex’s main chiefs gathered over one thousand men with planting sticks in hand. If Columbus would drop the gold tribute, they offered to plant all the food the Spanish would ever want to eat. They said to Columbus: We will feed you here on the island and also all of your people back in Castile. You don't even need to work (Barriero, 1990). Of course, the colonizers wanted gold or, in lieu of it, slaves and precious woods. This story where chiefs offer men with planting sticks to appease Spanish hunger, shows how the taino people valued land to grow food and their belief that all of the people had the right to eat.

Everyone in the society had a food or other goods-producing tasks. Even the highly esteemed caciques, or chiefs, and bohiques (shamans/medicine people) were often seen planting, hunting, and fishing along with their people. In the taino culture, the earth’s primary bounties, particularly food, were to be produced in cooperation and shared with everyone.

By all descriptions, taino life and culture at point of contact with Europeans was uniquely adapted to their environment. Population estimates vary greatly but put the number of inhabitants in Hispaniola from 500,000 to 3 million. Estimates for Cuba vary from 120,000 to 200,000. Newer estimates push that number up. When Columbus arrived, Hispaniola was the center of Taino culture, from which it appears to have traveled to Cuba, Puerto Rico and the outer islands. Hispaniola like Puerto Rico was divided into main cacicazgos or chiefdoms.

Cultural life on the lush island featured gardens, ball courts, and huge areytos (round dances) with speaking forums and poets. The Spaniards observed little or no fighting among the tainos. They said the chiefs and their councils of elders were well behaved and spoke with deliberation and great authority. The Spanish Jesuit Bartolomeo de Las Casas wrote, ‘The Indians have much better judgment and maintain much better public order and government than many other nations which are overwhelmingly proud of themselves and which hold Indians in
contempt.’ Meaning, the Spanish looked down upon the tainos and didn’t view them as equals, yet taino culture and society was every bit as equal and some would say more advanced than their European counterparts.

C. Teaching materials.

Lesson Implementation

Both these readings are meant to give the reader a sense of how the Caribbean was explored and peopled. The first reading is meant to be used as a read aloud. It tells the story of how the first pre-tainos made that first journey of exploration into the Caribbean basin. It describes their journey up the islands from Venezuela and finally culminating in Borinquen (Puerto Rico). The second reading is more succinct and could be used as an in-class reading or given as homework with a follow up discussion and charting of ideas.

Discussion (Brainstorming)

Before the teacher begins to read the text, have a conversation about exploration. Think about some of these questions in case you need to prompt the students along the way.

- What does it mean to explore?

- Why do we explore?

- What are some of the things we need to think about if we are going to explore?

- Does the environment dictate how we can explore? Over land, undersea, by sea, by air, climate...

- List some of the challenges an explorer might encounter.

- What are some of the things an explorer need to have in order to explore?

- Think about both items the can bring and knowledge they might need to have.
Have the students think about times they have gone “adventuring” while on camping trips, visits to parks, or just new places. As they think about the places they have been and what might have been some of those challenges, create a list on some chart paper. As your begin to the read aloud ask the students to begin another list for the early tainos. Tell them to write down any that fits into the categories above or that was missed and not on the list.

The read aloud might broken into two sections, with the teacher beginning in class with half the reading, and taking some time to open up to some questions and additions to the list for *Who were taino explorers?* The same half of the reading can be sent home has homework. Have the students reread and see if there were any detailed that might have been overlooked or missed.

The next class open up with a small discussion to add details to the *Who were the taino explorers?* (Create a chart). Continue the re aloud reminding the student to write down any details they think are relevant to the chart. Leave some time at the end of the class to revisit the chart and add more details. This chart can live in your classroom until you begin your next chart.

It is important to reference some of the earlier European explorers before jumping into someone like Columbus. The Vikings were European contemporaries of the tainos, exploring the north Atlantic between 800-1100 AD. Once again, you can pose the same types of questions to the students about Viking exploration. The goal is for the students to look at another group of explorers and find both the similarities and differences.

Thus, the groundwork has been set for charting Vikings. Most of the students have had some exposure to Vikings through older siblings, parents, books, media and word of mouth. *Reading A to Z* has a leveled reader titled, *Vikings* by William Houseman. This is available in
level T, W, and Z is good point of entry. The text is more comprehensive compared to the taino read aloud, but can be shortened depending on the length and structure of the unit. The Vikings reading can begin in class and completed at home, with the charting of all the relevant details done on chart paper. Once completed, there will be two charts detailing both the taino and Viking explorers.

**Short Written Assignment**

This information can be turned into a short compare and contrast paper to acquaint students with this style of paper writing. It could also be used to introduce the students into the study of the Age of Exploration. A teacher could personalize the study by focusing on a single explorer, such as Marco Polo, which would expose the students to the events that lead up to the Age of Exploration.

As stated before, the goal is give the students a sense of the early explorers of the Caribbean before the arrival of Europeans. By contrasting the tainos and the Vikings, students will have a better understanding of global exploration, as well as the people that were engaged in the exploration.

The natural progression in the studying the Age of Exploration and its bridge to the New World is to arrive at Columbus. By the time the students begin to study Columbus, they will have a good sense about the reasons, challenges and goals of exploration. Students can begin by reading, *Who was Christopher Columbus?* by Bonnie Bader. This particular nonfiction text gives an accessible account of Columbus’s early life, his main voyages, and his life after exploring. Most teachers who have taught a unit on Columbus may use other resources on how to approach he “explored” the New World. The goal is to introduce Columbus within the context of
exploration, and allow the students to develop their own broader perspective of who really were these early explorers.

**Chart: Who was Columbus?**

Having already created a chart for the Vikings and the taino, create a chart for Columbus and name it, *Who was Columbus?* Pose the same questions and see if they can be answered based on the Bonnie Bader book. If students need prompting, ask them the following questions:

- *What were Columbus's reasons for exploring?*
- *Were there any advantages sailing 300 years after the Vikings?*
- *Are the more similarities between the Vikings and Columbus, than with the tainos?*

In talking about taino, Vikings and the Spanish explorers, the students should notice that the tainos explored the Caribbean out of a necessity for better resources and possibly overpopulation. They also embodied that curiosity of what might be out there. The also settled the islands they found. The geography was not particularly foreign to them, and they shared these two things in common with the Vikings that set up settlements in Iceland, Greenland and eastern Canada. Exploration was about survival to them, but this differed from Columbus. Columbus set out to find Indian and he knew that he was heading to a foreign land. The reasons for his exploration was driven by fortune and fame, and it would ultimately shape how he would explore and interact with the lands he would encounter.

**Follow-up Reading & Discussion**

Text: *What Became of the Tainos?* by Robert M. Poole

History books and historical articles all mention the decimation of the taino that was predominantly cause by germs, smallpox in particular. If the students are curious about the
plight of the tainos, they can read Robert M. Poole’s article, *What Became of the Taínos?* The article traces the writer’s explorations through the Dominican Republic and Eastern Cuba in search for people that are “pure taínos.” He is unable to find “pure taínos”, but what he does discover are pockets of people living remotely in Eastern Cuba that have maintained their taíno roots, living in a manner that straddles both worlds.

Today, taíno heritage survives in everyday phrases and discourse in both Spanish and English. The legacy of the taíno people and their language can be found in words that we associate as common within the English language and even more so with the Spanish spoken in the Caribbean basin. Some of these terms include:

- *barbacoa* - barbecue
- *guava* - guava
- *hamaca* - hammock
- *huracán* - hurricane
- *iguana* – iguana
- *manati* - manatee
- *tabacu* – tobacco

Words like barbecue, hurricane and tobacco have become widespread and adopted worldwide. Other taíno words have become so entrenched in the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico, that there are no Spanish equivalents (see the appendix for comprehensive list of taíno words used today).
IV. Summary discussion
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A. Personal reflection

What is your history? Where does one begin? At what age do you begin to learn about your history? These are huge questions. In some countries your history is directly tied into your religion. In other countries the lines where your history begins might be blurred because of colonization, warfare or development. Being colonized, past histories are erased, destroyed or forgotten. Warfare equally contributes to the destruction of history by robbing countries of the people and their collective histories. Development can lead people away from their more humble past by forging new and modern histories, making it harder for people to look back at where they came from.

People can also be galvanized by colonization, warfare and development and find within themselves ways of preserving or searching for their history. In the forty plus years that I have been alive, I have noticed a resurgence of interest in taino culture and nationhood. Stories have existed in the folklore of Puerto Rico and the other large Caribbean islands, words have floated out of our mouths every day, and we have enjoyed meal after meal of foods that predate Columbus. But the education that we received didn't integrate these cultural nuances into our collective Puerto Rican history, at least not at the elementary school level. For those who were interested in their past, their identity, they began a voyage that started in books and continued in self-reflection. For the most part, these were adults that made this journey into discovery.

As a teacher, my role is open those doors of history to all students, especially the younger ones. We weren't there 500 years ago, and we only have stories based on the written accounts of Europeans. It is easy to teach what is most accessible and accepted, but that would be a great disservice to all the young minds beginning to learn about the world around them. Therefore,
there is a great need to share more voices of other people, especially the ones that are not heard enough. The taino people belong to that great migration of people that populated the Americas. Thus, living in the United States we should and it is in our best interests to study native voices.

Writing about the migration of those early Native Americans, the Arawak-speaking people that came out of the Orinoco Basin tells a story of exploration and discovery. It is a story shared by all who wish to venture out and discover something new. The taino, like so many other explorers willed themselves to venture out into the sea to discover and discover what was beyond the horizon. They did so with all the tools and resources that they had at their disposal and succeeded in settling the entire Caribbean at one point. They grew into an incredibly complex civilization steeped in religion, art, trade, and agriculture. In teaching the Age of Exploration within the social studies curriculum, I found that the representation of the taino people was lacking and I felt that it would be a perfect opportunity to introduce and expand the ideas of non-western explorers.

B. Implications for the curriculum

As teachers we need to challenge ourselves with the subject matter we teach. If we are teaching history, then we must continue to research new books on the subjects we teach. Columbus and the ‘discovery of the new world’ is an area that has been challenged in recent years. Thirty years ago Columbus was a hero. Historians spoke of him in such reverence, as the man who would challenge the notions of global navigation. Historians spoke of the young boy from Genoa that was raised in a working-class family and aspired for greatness upon the high seas. We were told how hard it was for him to find the funding in order to prove the world that the world was more what had been discovered at that point. As young readers, we were drawn
into this tragic-heroic figure and we began to vicariously live through his challenges. We were in awe when he completed his trans-Atlantic voyage successfully finding land and discovering the Americas.

Some of the young readers knew intuitively or through some exposure from a sibling, parents or media that he didn’t reach India. However, the new people he “discovered” were barely clothed and lacked large sail ships and metal weapons. They didn’t even have a written language. As a young student, these facts quickly coalesced to an image of people that weren't as sophisticated and seemed primitive. The interaction between the Columbus and his men with the Taínos was never fully explored during that unit of study. We learned that they eventually fought the Spanish and lost, but it was taught in such a way that we felt no remorse for the treatment of the Taínos. This feeling was similar to how some students might have felt about the interactions between Native Americans and the pilgrims and American settlers that went west. The natives were the enemy.

In high school we learn that history is written by the conquerors. For a large portion of Western history this slant or bias is true. Where are the stories of the conquered? We are doing a disservice to our younger students if we are to present these seminal events in history and we fail to teach them from a multicultural perspective. As teachers, we should strive to approach teaching lessons with the five dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 1998).

The goal is to challenge this narrow lens and allow the students the opportunity to build their own ideas about seminal moments. By adopting a multicultural curriculum, all students can benefit. Teaching about the taino as explorers also provides an opportunity for students of Puerto Rican heritage to see that their culture and history doesn’t begin with colonization and enslavement, but rather with a civilization as rich and ancient as that of European colonizers.
Teaching about the taino will also benefit students from diverse groups to see and identify their own experiences with oppression through a critical historical lens – and how resistance can take many forms across generations. These are histories that celebrate the past achievements of pre-Columbian peoples. It also illuminates the fact that tainos and possibly other indigenous cultures didn’t just disappear. A thousand years of history can’t be wiped away so easily. Scientist mapping mitochondrial DNA have found that at least 60 percent of the Puerto Ricans share Taíno DNA. The Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico is peppered with taino words, and taino influence has permeated the local cuisine. These findings show that although taino were decimated in the wake of European colonization, those that survived intermarried or were assimilated into the dynamic synthesis of cultural legacies created on the island.

In future social studies lessons, students will be better equipped with the skills to look critically at the stories being told and question why certain events turned out they way they did. They will also become more aware of diverse histories and consider steps they might want to take in confronting oppressive conditions today – for people in their own community, nation or globally. The teacher who incorporates a study of the taino within a multicultural perspective can greatly influence the way students learn and approach history and social studies in all grades.
V. Bibliography
V. Bibliography

A. References:


**B. Online Resources**

http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1998/3/98.03.04.x.html


History Channel staff. *Vikings*. 2009
http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/vikings-history

Jack Weatherford. *Examining the reputation of Christopher Columbus*

Jane Yolen’s *Encounter* retold visually
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01SKUjCVCVG

New York State Social Studies Standards:
http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html

Origin of the Tainos
http://www.stjohnbeachguide.com/Taino.htm

Taino: *Voices From the Past*

http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/what-became-of-the-taino-73824867/?no-ist=&fb_locale=ru_RU&page=1

http://www.yale.edu/gsp/colonial/puerto-rico/
### VI. Appendices

#### A. Sample worksheets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taíno–Arawak</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abuje</td>
<td>Insect</td>
<td>that stings/bites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahi</td>
<td>Aji</td>
<td>sweet or hot pepper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagua</td>
<td>Baguada</td>
<td>sea, shower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbacoa</td>
<td>Barbacoa</td>
<td>four-legged stand for barbecuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batey</td>
<td>Batey</td>
<td>yard area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batuka</td>
<td></td>
<td>rocking chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bexuco</td>
<td>Behuco</td>
<td>Vine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boricua</td>
<td>Boricua</td>
<td>valiant people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boriken</td>
<td>Borinquen</td>
<td>Great land of the valiant and noble people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buho</td>
<td>Buho</td>
<td>Owl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buren</td>
<td>Buren</td>
<td>flat cooking plate or griddle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buruquina</td>
<td>Buruquina</td>
<td>large nocturnal land crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabuya</td>
<td>Cabulla</td>
<td>fishing line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cajuil</td>
<td>Cajuil</td>
<td>cashew, cashew nut fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cana</td>
<td></td>
<td>type of palm tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>canoa</td>
<td>canoa</td>
<td>canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canucos</td>
<td>canucos</td>
<td>raised mounds for farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>sea turtle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casabe</td>
<td>Casabe</td>
<td>baked yuca flatbread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cayo</td>
<td>Cayo</td>
<td>small island, atoll, protruding coral reef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chichigua</td>
<td>Chiringa</td>
<td>kite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>small quantity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinchinlin</td>
<td>chichilin</td>
<td>small black bird, a small amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choreto</td>
<td>Chorete</td>
<td>abundace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocolia</td>
<td>Cocolia</td>
<td>saltwater crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coki</td>
<td>Coqui</td>
<td>small, nocturnal singing frog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinchorro</td>
<td>Chinchorro</td>
<td>long fishing nets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comexen</td>
<td>Comejen</td>
<td>termites</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colibri</td>
<td>Colibri</td>
<td>hummingbird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cucubano</td>
<td>Cucubano</td>
<td>firefly, lightning bug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dita</td>
<td></td>
<td>cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guaraguao</td>
<td>Guaraguao</td>
<td>Red-tailed hawk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guateque</td>
<td>Guateque</td>
<td>singing and dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guayo</td>
<td>Guayo</td>
<td>grater, grating tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guava</td>
<td>Guava</td>
<td>sweet tropical fruit with a green exterior and pink flesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guanabana</td>
<td>Guanabana</td>
<td>Soursop, large white fleshed fruit with small black seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiro</td>
<td>Guiro</td>
<td>gourd instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaca</td>
<td>Hamaca</td>
<td>Hammock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juey</td>
<td>Juey, jueyes</td>
<td>edible land crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurancan</td>
<td>Huracan</td>
<td>hurricane, god of chaos and disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iguana</td>
<td>Iguana</td>
<td>iguana, large tropical lizard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inriri</td>
<td>Inriri</td>
<td>wood pecker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karacol</td>
<td>Caracol</td>
<td>sea shell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kokuyo</td>
<td>Cucuyo</td>
<td>firefly, lightning bug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabi</td>
<td>Mavi</td>
<td>fermented drink made from the bark of an indigenous tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macana</td>
<td>Macana</td>
<td>weapon, war club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamey</td>
<td>mamey</td>
<td>sweet tropical fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manati</td>
<td>manati</td>
<td>manatee, large aquatic mammal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mani</td>
<td>Mani</td>
<td>peanuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mime</td>
<td>Mime</td>
<td>gnat, small fly that bites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasa</td>
<td>Nasa</td>
<td>cage used to catch fish and lobsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piragua</td>
<td>Piragua</td>
<td>long boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitirre</td>
<td>Pitirre</td>
<td>small bird, gray kingbird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabacu</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>large leafy plant that was dried and smoked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The above glossary compiled from print and online references including: *Native Languages of the Americas: Preserving and promoting American Indian languages*. [www.native-languages.org](http://www.native-languages.org). R.A-R.
B. Selected books for young readers

Below are four books that can be incorporated into read aloud time. Each of these books is accessible to students in grades 2-5 with colorful illustrations and easy to follow language.


George L. Crespo skillfully recreates this taino pourquoi story about how the sea was created. When a great taino hunter disappears during a hurricane only his bow and arrow were recovered. His parents hang this powerful bow and arrow inside a gourd from the ceiling of the bohio. One day, when the villagers were starving for food, the gourd magically filled itself with enough fish to feed the village. Some curious boys were assigned to watch over the magical gourd, but by accident end up knocking it over and breaking the gourd. At that particular moment the entire hut is filled with water teeming with life. The entire hut is set afloat as water cascades over the land. Eventually the water settles creating the island of Borinquen. This new sea is filled with all sorts of creatures and the villagers will always benefit from the bounty of the sea. This pourquoi story reflects the close bond that the taino people shared with the sea.


Nina Jaffe retells a taino creation myth...about a time when all the taino people lived ON A high mountain that was surrounded by desert. One day a young boy goes out looking for food when he finds a seed floating in the wind. The next day he finds another and another until his pouch can’t hold anymore. He decides to take all these back to the mountaintop and plant them. Slowly leaves begin to appear and plants grow and flower. Eventually the mountaintop becomes a forest and two children see the most beautiful golden flower. This golden flower gives birth to the most magnificent magical calabaza (pumpkin/squash). One day a man walking up the mountain gets the idea that if he could have this magical pumpkin, he could have the power of the sun. At the same time another approaching the pumpkin has a similar desire to possess this golden calabaza. The two men fight over who will have it, and in the scuffle the pumpkin tumbles down the mountain and cracks open. Out of the calabaza water begins to flow and flow. It continues to flow filling the landscape with water and all kinds of sea creatures. The taino people atop the mountain wonder if the water will ever stop or engulf them all. When the waters final stop only the top of the forested mountain remains and blue waters teeming with life now surrounded the taino people. This is a myth of how Borinquen (Puerto Rico) came to be.

Harriet Rohmer brings the reader into a lovely quest story filled with taíno lore. This story introduces students to taíno life and how connected they were to their environment. When the young girl Atariba falls ill, it is her best friend who sets out on a quest to help save her. Niguayona ventures through the forest wondering how he can save his dear friend. Deep in the forest a bird speaks to him, telling him what he must do to save his dear friend. He travels through the forest searching tallest kaimoní tree in order to pluck its fruit. Along the way he is help by the forest, fruits and the river in order to save his dear friend. Atariba and Niguayona through their shared experiences would become famous leaders of their people.


ENCOUNTER is a departure from the more zoomorphic and fictional characters of YOLEN’S previous books. Here she delves into the seminal “first encounter” of the taíno people and Christopher Columbus. What is interesting about her recreation of that moment is that the whole story is told through eyes of a young taíno boy. The boy has a dream, a premonition of Columbus’s arrival, and when he finally catches sight of the Spanish ships he quickly realizes that his dream has come true. The young taíno boy attempts to warn his people of the dangers these new people will bring, but he is ignored. His people in turn open up and extend their hospitality to Columbus and his men, not realizing what is about to happen. Columbus’s men abduct some of the young taínos. The young boy manages to escape and heads towards his home in hopes of warning his people about the Spanish threat.

Yolen does acknowledge that there isn’t any first hand record of the taínos’ reaction to Columbus and his men. Therefore, she has recreated what might have been as these two cultures met over 500 years ago on the island of San Salvador. Encounter can serve as a read aloud to elicit some dialog within the class about that initial encounter and how did both Columbus and the taíno people perceived one another.

*R.A-R. 1/10/15*