

CLUSTER IV. Taíno Culture and the Ancient Caribbean

How did geography and a history of migration lead ancient peoples of the Caribbean to create a unique culture? How is that culture still influential today?

This brief cluster, built around the Supporting Question above, centers the culture and history of the Taíno – the region’s predominant Indigenous group – that settled in the Caribbean more than two thousand years ago. By the 1st millennium CE, historians describe the ancient Caribbean as a bustling highway of movement and exchange, where skillful mariners connected island societies to one another and to other peoples and cultures of the Americas, including the Maya. Lesson 22 introduces the ancient Caribbean through the themes of migration and interaction with the natural environment. On the islands of Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Taíno people shaped a unique way of life influenced by forces such as weather, the sea, and the natural resources of their islands. Lesson 23 makes a past-to-present connection, demonstrating that Taíno people’s cultural and historical legacies are often important to their sense of identity in the present. An important element of this cluster is the culturally-affirming recognition that Indigenous people have endured, and that knowing their history matters to them as it matters to all people.

By the end of this cluster, students should be able to...

- ❖ Analyze primary and secondary sources to explain the importance of migration, cultural exchange and interaction with the natural world in the Caribbean.
- ❖ Describe features of the unique culture of the Taíno people.
- ❖ Explain in discussion and writing how legacies of early Taíno culture survive today.

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Vocabulary

Tier 2:

migration, legacy/legacies

Tier 3:

Taíno

Standards and Lessons Where Addressed

Key Content Standards	Lessons
6.5a&b:1 On a physical map of the world, use cardinal directions, map scales, key/legend, and title to locate Central America, the Caribbean Sea, South America, and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Locate important physical features and other characteristics of the region.	22, 23
6.5a&b:3 Explain how absolute and relative locations, major physical characteristics, climate and natural resources in this region have influenced settlement patterns, population size, and economies of the countries.	22, 23
6.5a&b:4 Describe the culture and way of life of indigenous populations in the region.	22, 23

Key Practice Standards	Lessons
(3) Organize information from multiple primary and secondary sources.	22, 23

Key Literacy Standards	Lessons
(W4) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	23

Advance Preparation

For building background knowledge before teaching these lessons, see

[Ancient DNA Shows Humans Settled the Caribbean in Two Distinct Waves](#), *New York Times* online (updated November 9, 2021)

[Taíno – Native Heritage and Identity](#), Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

[The Taínos of Puerto Rico: Rediscovering Borinquen](#), Yale University Teachers' Institute

LESSON 22: The Shape of Ancient Taíno Culture and Society

Context

Lesson 22 introduces the ancient Caribbean through the themes of physical geography, migration, and the natural environment. It features the Taíno – one of the region’s major Indigenous groups. The Taíno came to the Caribbean more than 2,000 years ago, originally from South America, and made their way through the northern part of South America by boat. They lived in the islands of Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and elsewhere. In the lesson activator, students dive into Caribbean ways of life through Taíno language and the many words it “loaned” to English (via Spanish). This activity sets up the main lesson themes of migration, cultural exchange and interaction with the natural world. In the second part of the lesson, students delve more deeply into the same themes by analyzing a selection of primary and secondary sources in a self-paced digital-learning packet (PS3). Here students analyze the themes as they were expressed in important areas of daily life including Taíno religion, ritual, government, and social structure.

Learning Objective

Identify and analyze examples of interaction with the natural environment and migration in a packet of primary and secondary sources depicting Taíno history, beliefs and ways of life.

Language Objective

Recount information about Taíno history by answering questions about multimedia sources on a graphic organizer.

Supporting Multilingual Learners

Levels 1-3: Review with individual students your expectation for how many questions to complete, differentiating as appropriate. Give a brief overview of the topics and questions on the slides (preview the text) before having students learn on their own to support their reading comprehension.

Levels 4-5: As above, review with individual students your expectation for how many questions to complete, differentiating as appropriate. Remind students to refer to the Taíno words flashcards and note bold or italics formatting to show Taíno language words in the text.

Vocabulary

Taíno, migration

Materials

[Lesson 22 & 23 Slidedeck](#), [Taíno Words Flashcards](#), [Taíno Words Note Sheet & Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#), [Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life](#) digital learning packet (slide set), a timer you can set

Advance Preparation

Before class, print and cut apart the [Taíno Words Flashcards](#). There are ten cards with words and ten cards with icons; separate these and hold the picture pack aside as the activity begins. Print enough for students to work in pairs or trios with a flashcard pack for each group.



Supporting Question Launch (5 min)

Project [Slide 2](#) with the supporting question for this cluster:

How did geography and a history of migration lead ancient peoples of the Caribbean to create a unique culture? How is that culture still influential today?

Ask students to pair up. Give them a few minutes to go through the KW routine (what do I know, what do I want to know about this question). Gather suggestions from these pair discussions and, as a class, make a KW chart on poster paper or in digital format.

Supporting All Learners

Migration was a vocabulary word introduced in Unit 6.1, but it may be helpful to review that it means “movement from one place to another.”

Words as a Window into Taíno Culture (15 minutes)

Shift back to the lesson title on [Slide 1](#), and tell students that in this lesson and the next, they will be investigating the Caribbean region in the ancient past and more recently. They will focus especially on *one* Indigenous group (of several) that inhabited the Caribbean islands beginning around 300 BCE: the Taíno.

Like the Maya, this Indigenous community experienced great hardship and struggle when the Spanish came. But their cultural traditions continue today in parts of the Caribbean and in the many places that Caribbean people have migrated in the U.S., including our state of Massachusetts.

The way students will be introduced to the Taíno first is through some of their own words.

Procedure

- ❖ Divide students into pairs or threes.
- ❖ Give them ten cards, each displaying a Taíno word (cards cut from the left column of the [Taíno Words Flashcards](#)). Have a timer ready. Tell students they will have **two minutes** to guess the English meaning of these words – as many as they can before the buzzer.

(Student hint: many are similar to words we use in Spanish and English today, though a few have no relationship to English words.)

- ❖ Have students record their guesses on their [Taíno Words Note Sheet](#) in columns 1 and 2 (page 1 of handout).
- ❖ Next, pass out the card packs with icons on them (cards cut from the right column of the [Taíno Words Flashcards](#)). This step allows students to self-check their initial guesses, using logic and process of elimination to fill in or fix answers.
- ❖ Ask groups to pair up the words and pictures as best they can. Tell them to make any needed corrections on their note sheets (column 3). This should take up to **three minutes**.
- ❖ After they finish, ask students to share their findings. Assist them with any words they could not define.

*The Taíno words that are not directly correlated to English words are bohio (house) and cacique (Chief, pronounced “kuh-**seek**”). Also note that the words mahiz (maize) and zavana (savanna) are similar to words students have learned in previous lessons or units.*

Now have students choose 1-2 words and write an answer in column 4 of the notes document (about **5 minutes**). The question in column 4 reads:

How could this word tell us something about where or how

Teaching Note

Summarize/convey these insights as you choose. Words are more than just words! Social scientists understand that the languages we speak reveal a lot about our history, beliefs, and historical experiences. One thing that interests historians for example, is patterns of words that cross over from one language to another; this often parallels the history of people’s movements and migrations in the past. Another area of interest for social scientists is the vocabulary and expressions that people developed. These can tell us what a community cared about, what they feared, or what they noticed most in the world around them.

Supporting Multilingual Learners

For students of WIDA levels 1-3, you can begin at this step.

Teaching Note

By helping students remember that the Spanish

Taíno people lived in the ancient past?

For a model, you can share the example on [Slide 3](#).

Canoa - Canoe

This word shows that the Taíno used the Caribbean sea that surrounded them, and the canoe was their form of transportation.

Ask a few students to share their sentences.

Note: Students who have extra time can also tackle the “challenge question” at the bottom of the page.

(i.e. Columbus’s expedition) and then other European peoples migrated to the Caribbean as their first place of settlement in the Americas, the activity circles back to the theme of **migration**.

See if students can imagine that in Europe, they didn’t need a word for creatures they didn’t have or weather patterns that were not common there. In this new environment (the Caribbean Islands) with different geography, they needed those words. So they borrowed them from the Indigenous people of the area.

This short discussion previews an idea featured in the main activity: that human movement leads to cultural exchange.

★ Activity: Investigating Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life (30 minutes, plus 10 in the next lesson)

In this activity students learn about the history of the Taíno people, using a “digital learning packet” called [Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life](#) (slide deck) and the [Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#) on pages 2-3 of the handout. The packet takes the form of a slide deck for students to work through in pairs at their own pace. It includes short pieces of text interspersed with links, photos, and tasks to do along the way.

Students will be responsible for completing five of the activities. They must do #1, #2, and #5. Then they may choose either #3 or #4, and either #6 or #7. These directions appear on the student notes sheet.

Supporting All Learners: Options

One possibility for differentiating this lesson is to allow other (more limited) choice options. Another: You may pair or group students according to class needs.

Each slide has high-level thinking challenges and supplemental materials.

Tell students that they will work as investigators today. As they read and take notes, they will be finding pieces of evidence to answer our Supporting Question:

How did geography and a history of movement and migration lead ancient peoples of the Caribbean to create a unique culture?

Students who benefit from extra challenges could choose to go deeper on some.

Direct students to open their [Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life](#) digital learning packet (slide deck) and the [Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#) that goes with it. Orient them to these materials and answer any questions students have. Their work on the packet will take the rest of the class period and the first ten minutes of the next class.

Note that the final portion of the activity – the classmate exchange at the end of the [Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#) – will occur at the start of the next class period.

LESSON 23: Legacies of Taíno Culture Today

Context

Lesson 23 makes a past-to-present connection, demonstrating that Taíno people's cultural and historical legacies are, for many, important to their sense of identity in the present. Following a wrap-up from Lesson 22, students analyze a video about Taíno cultural legacies made by a Dominican-Taíno researcher and traditional musician, then relate the film to the words of a young Caribbean-American person of Taíno heritage (PS3). To close, students recall and describe one Taíno cultural legacy, relating it to a cultural legacy of their own community or family in the form of an imagined "pen pal" letter (W4). This lesson underscores the point that Indigenous people and their cultural traditions still thrive in the continents of the Americas. It also gives students practice in discussing and writing about modern lessons we can take from ancient American history, a component of the unit's final project/summative assessment.

Learning Objective

Describe the ways in which Taíno cultural legacies are important to Caribbean and Caribbean-American people today.

Language Objective

Write about Taíno cultural legacies in Caribbean and Caribbean-American cultures and the student's own culture using the form and conventions of a pen-pal letter.

Supporting Multilingual Learners

Levels 1-3: Provide a cloze paragraph for the letter where students can fill in words or short phrases, according to their level.

Levels 4-5: Co-construct topic sentences with the students to help guide their writing. Explicitly teach conventions of a friendly letter: using first and second person, casual and/or emotive language, different options for closing, etc.

Vocabulary

legacy/legacies

Materials

[Lesson 22-23 Slidedeck](#), [Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life](#) digital learning packet (slide set), [Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#), [Today's Taíno Culture Letter](#) (student handout)

Activity (Continued): Investigating Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life (10 minutes)

Organize students into small groups of your choice. Give them just two minutes to reorient to their [Taíno History, Beliefs, and Way of Life](#) packets and complete the [Digital Learning Packet Notes Sheet](#) (pp. 2-3) that they worked on in the prior class period.

To close out the activity, using a discussion routine of your choice, have students discuss the summarizing question at the end of the notes sheet. Preserve the bulk of the time for this task.

Key Formative Assessment

Collect students' Notes Sheet as a key formative assessment of Practice Standard 3 (organizing information from multiple primary and secondary sources).

★ Activity: We Are Still Here: Taíno Legacies Today (20 minutes)

Teaching Note:

For centuries, historians and government leaders said that “the Taíno were extinct.” They claimed that the Taíno were all destroyed, along with their cultures and history, by Spanish diseases, cruelty, and oppression. These actions were labeled a total genocide. But this proved to be untrue. Spanish and Taíno people produced children, most often through force and violence, but this intermingling carried the population forward. Over time, across the Caribbean and its many islands, some Caribbean people kept the stories and practices of their Indigenous culture alive.

Recently, several genetic researchers have used DNA to prove what many suspected: that a large portion of the people who live today on the Caribbean islands still have Taíno ancestry. This has led to more openness, interest, and pride in Taíno culture today, especially among a new generation of Caribbean people who have ties to this heritage.

Teaching Note:

For further context on Taíno ancestry, see the article [On Indigenous People's Day, Meet the Survivors of a 'Paper Genocide'](#) (National Geographic).

Project [Slide 4](#), which once again shows the Supporting Question for this cluster:

How did physical geography, natural environment, and a history of migration lead ancient peoples of the Caribbean to create a unique culture? How is that culture still influential today?

Tell students that today they will answer the second part of that question. That means they'll be exploring the present-day cultural **legacies** that Taíno people have carried forward from their history. Pause here to clarify the definition of **legacies** ([Slide 5](#)).

Before showing students the video [How Taíno Culture Affects Us Today](#) (6 minutes), set the stage. Explain (in your own words) that Irka Mateo is a Taína folklorist and musician, intent on keeping Taíno culture thriving. In the film she talks first about the origins of the Taíno people, then the conquering of the Caribbean by the Spanish, which was violent and deathly for many of the Taíno people. Last, she'll speak about **legacies** of the Taíno and how they are thriving today. Explain that you will pause twice during the film to process what students see and hear, and discuss it further at the end.

Screen the video (link on [Slide 6](#)). Pause first to check with students after Mateo's description of the Spanish conquest (at 2:24). Ask,

What did the Spanish try to take away and destroy?

Students can respond popcorn-style or as a turn-and-talk.

Answer: not only people's lives and freedom, but also their daily life practices, religion and languages.

Pause again at the 3:06 mark (just before the vocabulary section). Ask students to offer up examples of what survived from Taíno culture and history after the Spanish conquest. Create a list on the board (this will set students up for success in the Putting It Together activity below).

Possible answers may include: language, agricultural practices, housing style, instruments, ways of living with the land, canoes, sense of identity.

Advance Preparation

The film [How Taíno Culture Affects Us Today](#) was made specifically for youth audiences. It reinforces, in a lively manner, some points learned in Lesson 22 alongside new insights for Lesson 23's central theme of cultural continuity. Preview the film in case you wish to clip any of the repeated material; also be aware that the speaker addresses atrocities against Taíno people. Finally do note that the speaker opens and closes briefly using Spanish language (with English subtitles). It's recommended you do include one or both of these segments since her use of Spanish is an important clue for students about the message and purpose of the film; see discussion questions below.

Continue watching. When the video is complete, engage in a discussion about the video's *point of view*. Who is Irka Mateo and why did she make this video? What was the purpose of her message? Who is this video especially made for?

Students may talk about her sense of identity and pride and about her understanding of her culture and wanting to spread her knowledge. The video could be intended for people from these islands who didn't know about their heritage, or for anyone to learn about the Taíno.

Lastly, tell students they will finish by hearing words from Jarina de Marco. She's a young Caribbean-American (Dominican) musician who has worked hard to learn Taíno traditions from her mother, Irka Mateo. Share the quote on [Slide 7](#).

Ask students to discuss her words (in pairs or table groups) using these prompts ([Slide 8](#)):

- *How does she explain why she cares to know about her family's Taíno legacies?*
- *Think about the metaphor she uses in this quote. How do these words help you visualize her feelings about being a Taíno person?*



Putting It Together: Writing a Letter (20 min)

Having just identified aspects of the unique culture of the Taíno and learned about how they originated, students will demonstrate their understanding by writing a two-paragraph letter to an imagined (or real!) family member or pen-pal living on one of the Caribbean islands. They can use this sheet, [Today's Taíno Culture Letter](#) or a format of your choice. Share the instructions on [Slide 9](#):

Your correspondent will be eager to know what you have been learning about Taíno history and traditions!

Teaching Note

It may make the quote more vivid if you first show students a very short segment of the film about this mother and daughter pair, [Honoring Taíno Traditions with Jarina de Marco](#), from which the quote is taken. The link also appears on Slide 8 with the quote. Try the segment from 1:20 to 2:25; you may pre-set the video to start at 1:20 if you wish.

Supporting All Learners

If your students would benefit from a model for paragraph 2, you can share [Slide 10](#); alternatively, you can create your own example. Students have shared several times this year about the preservation and passing of knowledge

- ❖ *In the first paragraph, describe one **legacy** of Taíno culture and explain why or how you understand it is important to Taíno and Caribbean people today. Also share why this cultural legacy interested you or why you picked it.*
- ❖ *In the second paragraph, describe one cultural or historical **legacy** that was passed down in your family or community. Explain why or how it is important to you.*

Formative Assessment

Collect students' letters as a formative assessment.

or cultural practices in their own lives (though previously on a more constrained topic and with more scaffolding). Of course, adapt or change the prompt for your particular students as you see fit.

If students struggle to get started with their writing, suggest that they *echo the language in the directions (or the question) in their response*. For instance, their letter's first paragraph might start, "One important legacy of Taíno culture is..." or "It is still important to Taíno people today to..."