



Smithsonian  
*National Museum of the American Indian*

Museum Scholarship Group

June 9, 2015

The Honorable Myron D. Jackson  
Senator  
Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
Capitol Building, P.O. Box 1690  
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00804

Dear Senator Jackson,

Let me first of all congratulate your effort on behalf of recognition and appreciation for indigenous heritage in the Virgin Islands. The search of indigenous heritage is always important and in the Caribbean especially valuable, as in so many places it is ignored or even consciously marginalized. The relationship to the land and its ancestry, the point of origin of our peoples and cultures is better understood and appreciated because of such efforts.

The topics of your draft legislation are of interest, as I conduct research for our own multi-disciplinary effort, the Caribbean Indigenous Legacies Project (CILP), which is gathering study on surviving indigenities in the region. The call for respect of indigenous peoples' rights is welcome at a time when the Native world is under serious stress. The reconceptualization of our Caribbean islands in a continuous history, rather than in a "pre" history of the indigenous and a "real" history starting at European contact, is an important position.

Two points for consideration for your document.

1. Indigenous identity and ancestry are complex constructions and have cultural as well as biological components. It is important to establish as much documentation as possible of cultural perception and expression, historical or genealogical expression of indigenous identity in securing a footing for indigeneity. Genetic studies of DNA demonstrating presence of Amerindian DNA in families and individuals draw objection scientifically when considered as direct equivalent to ethnicity, per se, and are more acceptably considered when presented as an important additional component in the consideration of the origins and identity of a whole people or population.

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2. Of increasing focus and relevance is the eco-systemic and eco-agronomic quotient of a people. All intangible and material culture that ties people to the environment, especially in productive activities regardless of ethnic origin, is in itself a primary form of indigeneity. It is always of interest to document practices of indigeneity in crops and foodstuffs, in medicinal practices with herbs, in connections to special places and sacred sites. Among others, the agro-culinary practice of cropping the manioc or cassava and particularly the elaboration of the cassava tort (in Spanish, "casabe") is one measure of cultural persistence over time. Any other rituality or beliefs and practices relative to domestic modes of production (DMP) in foods, herbal medicine, crafts and arts, home construction, fishing and gathering and gardening, are always of interest. If indigeneity is rooted in the land, the emphasis on preservation and recovery of place-based knowledge is identifiably relevant. Of global concern and expression by indigenous peoples, the effects of climate change and climate disruption are in dire need of mitigation. The place-based knowledge of how to live on the Mother Earth is recognized by international agencies to be of central importance to mitigating the effects of climate change.

Orality and fabulosity as it has evolved in the human-nature nexus is also of high interest. Ceremonies in reciprocity with nature are particularly telling of indigeneity.

One additional thought: while the recognition of Indian peoples is important, the inclusion of specific organizations might be stated more as examples in a general field, rather than attach national law to specific organizations.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on your proposed project.

Best regards,



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for History and Culture Research

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