Chapter 6

Cultural Survival and the Indigenous Movement

The first sections of this final chapter expand on and go into detail about certain customary and spiritual areas of cultural survival in Borikén. The testimonies are powerful and help us to see clearer the extent of the Jíbaro presence. The shamanistic practice that came to be known as “espiritismo” (spiritualism), essentially predicting the future, spiritual healing, or assisting one on a spiritual level, has deep roots on the island. Over time, some important aspects of the Christian and African traditions were adopted and syncretized into the indigenous belief structure. I will comment on the meaning of this syncretism and how it pertains to certain spiritual traditions, such as the Rosario Cantar. I’ll further draw on analogies of how these practices relate back to ancient times and a general indigenous philosophy. Espiritismo was widely used in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and is still practiced today. Medicinal healing and linguistic survival are other significant areas that are looked at. These forms of survival are testament to degrees of resistance that were set into place over time. It should also be noted that espiritistas and cuanderos were prevalent and widely used among the early Boricua who went to Hawai‘i. This is documented by Arroyo, who tells numerous stories of different forms of healing performed and of telepathy. He wrote, “The espiritista was usually a good person, but could also put a curse on someone. Even though the Borinkees were religious, mostly Catholic, they all believed in the old ways, sometimes referred to as voodoo.” The latter parts of the chapter explore the role of the Jíbaro-Boricua in influencing the twentieth century independence movement on the island. I look at the indigenous meaning of the contemporary movement
and struggle and how breaking the cycle of dependency could create a more sustainable and just future.

**Customs, Espiritistas, and Cuanderos**

The practice of *espiritismo* has been passed down since ancient times as our ancestors routinely evoked the spirits to assist them. The most sacred and cherished spiritual symbol of indigenous Caribbean peoples is the *cemí*. Made of stone or wood, *cemís* are not “gods” or “idols,” as they have often been interpreted to be, but personal or familial guardians representing various spiritual entities and a link between the physical and ancestral worlds. They may be compared to the functions of Christian saints.² The *cemí*, whose powers were often evoked through the *cohoba* (a native plant that is inhaled) ceremony, was used as a means to, for example, heal the sick, assist women in childbirth, help bring about an abundant harvest, achieve victory in war, and make prophesies about the future. Although Pané, Peter Martyr, and Las Casas all equated the tradition with “devil worship,” they recorded numerous functions of the *cemí*. Las Casas observed, “When I would ask the Indians at times: ‘Who is this zemi you name?’ they answered me: ‘He who makes it rain and makes the sun shine and gives us children and the other benefits we desire.’”³ The powers drawn forth by the modern-day *espiritista* are basically a continuum of the spiritual practice of the ancient *behike*, similar to a shaman.

A woman I met in her seventies told me that when she was growing up everybody believed in *espiritistas*. Her Indian *apodo* is “Güiya.” When she was young she lived with her aunt in a *bohío* made of *yagua*. The floor was made of earth. She recalled that when she was pregnant with her son, one of his feet became positioned improperly. She was in pain and knew it would be dangerous if she went into labor. She consulted an *espiritista*, or “a man who worked with spirits,” who helped her and solved the problem.⁴ Güiya said her mother was *india*. She never ate on the table or sat on a chair. She always squatted and ate with her fingers. She ate from *dita* (a bowl-shaped calabash made from the native *higuera* tree), as most did in the old days and some still do today.⁵ The people back then also commonly drank from *coca* (a cup made from coconut that is African in origin). The use of the calabash of course relates back to the story of Yaya and Yayahel in the creation myth of the sea. Güiya expressed to me what her mother would do if she wanted it to stop raining. She would use a piece of stick, wrap one end with cloth, and light it on fire. She’d then wave it and say, “Santa Clara, make the rain go away,” repeatedly. “Clara,” or “claro,”