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A Note on the Derivation of the Word "Tobacco"

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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

A NOTE ON THE DERIVATION OF THE WORD "TOBACCO"

The origin of Spanish *tabaco* "tobacco" and its congeners is usually given as the Taino (pre-Conquest Haitian) name for "cigar," or for the forked tube employed to inhale *cohoba*, a narcotic powder whose identity has not been established, but which is believed to have been either *Piptadenia* or tobacco. Taino *cohoba* (also spelt *cohobba*, *cogioba*, *cahoba* in the sources) has been compared to the name of *Piptadenia* in various Arawak languages, (such as *curuba*, *curupa*, *yupa*, *yopa*, *niopa*); while de Goeje has noted without comment the resemblance of Taino *tabako* to the second word in Island Carib "thou art a great sleeper C *uairi* (great) *bi-tabako*."¹

This last phrase is in the Island Carib "women's speech," which—like Taino itself—belongs to the Arawakan family of languages. It is taken from Breton's Carib dictionary, where we find: "*tu es vn grand dormeur ouáiri bitábaco*" and, in the Carib-French section, "*ouairi bitábacou tu és vn grand dormeur*." Very little further search discloses obviously related forms such as: "*somme, ou sommeil titábacou, aboutácou, tabábaboágoni*;" "*ácou oeil, nácou mes yeux, lácou ses yeux*;" "*táboua nácou i'ay sommeil*;" "*atábouti nácou ie m'endors*;" "*taboú-catou lácou lira-ba! ha que celuy là est grand dormeur*;" "*taboú-bouca tóna va puiser de l'eau*," "*natábouriem i'en puise*"; *taboúali balanárocou il a sauté, s'est ietté dans la mer*."² It is not necessary to be a linguist in order to conclude, from a comparison of these and similar entries in the same work, that Island Carib [bitábaku] or [bitábako] consists of a pronominal prefix of the second person singular, [bi-], together with a compound of [tábu "dipped, dipping" and [áku] or [áko] "eye(s)"; so that the whole word may be aptly if inelegantly translated "thy shut-eye."

Returning now to Taino, among the meager recordings that have come down to us, we find: "*buticaco zarco de los ojos*" and "*xeyticaco negro de los ojos*," whose common part ("*-caco . . . de los ojos*") corresponds in form and meaning to Island Carib [káku], a denominal adjective meaning "having eyes, -eyed (as in black-eyed)," with which contrast [máku] "eyeless." The possibility of this being pure coincidence is rendered infinitesimal by a comparison of further Taino forms such as *caracaracol* "scabby individual," *mahite* "toothless," with Island Carib [kára] "having skin" (from [úra] "skin"), [káraku] "scabious" (from [úráku] "scabies"), and [mári(ti)] "(he is) toothless" (from [ári] "tooth or teeth").

In view of the narcotic effect of *cohoba* (as reported by Oviedo), it therefore seems not unreasonable to assume that [tabako] or [tabaku] had the same primary meaning in Taino as in the related language of the Island Carib women, namely "shut-eye"; but that in the former it became associated with the agent rather than (or as well as) its effect—much as among ourselves a particularly raw alcoholic liquor is sometimes dubbed "rot-gut." Unfortunately, this does not help to identify *cohoba*; for in referring

¹ De Goeje, "Nouvel Examen des Langues des Antilles," p. 7. In *Journ. Soc. Amér.* Paris, n.s. vol. XXXI, pp. 1–120. Paris, 1939.

² See Raymond Breton's *Dictionnaire Caraïbe-François* and *Dictionnaire François-Caraïbe*; facsimile editions reprinted by Jules Platzmann, Leipzig, 1892 and 1900. Citations are from pp. 16, 55, 117, and 443 in the former, and from pp. 126, 263, 366, and 408 in the latter volume.

to the powdered tobacco of the Island Carib, Breton says that "they put a pinch of it between their lip and gums, which is so strong that it often makes them swoon, or else intoxicates them, . . .";² while most of their living descendants now retire to bed with a pipe, without which, they declare, they could not sleep.

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BRITISH WEST INDIES

THE GAYAWALS OF BIHAR¹

The Gayawals are Brahman by caste and are of particular interest to the student of India because they form one of the "disreputable Brahman" communities.² They live in the city of Gaya which is one of the holy places of the Hindus. The word "Gayawal" means "inhabitant of Gaya," but it is only used to denote a particular Brahman community: the Gayawal Brahmans, since not all Brahmans who live in Gaya (in the Province of Bihar, India) are Gayawals. There are about 500 families and they belong to Gaya permanently. They live all together in the southern part of the city in an old and antiquated locality, yet even the rich Gayawals refuse to leave this old locality for new and better homes.

The Gayawals are endogamous and the community consists of a number of gotras, or exogamous groups, within the larger endogamous whole. Among the Gayawals the gotra is not inherited, but is acquired at the time of the initiation ceremony. They keep strictly to their marriage rules because they are eager to maintain the exclusiveness of their community and profession. Their insistence upon the practical aspects of marriage has led to "two exceptional usages—first, marriage contracts are often made while one, or even both, of the parties most concerned are still unborn; and secondly, little or no regard is paid to relative age."³ When a Gayawal is asked about these practices, he invariably rationalizes by saying that his community is endogamous because the Gayawals want to maintain their purity, that child marriage is a sure guarantee against sexual slackness, and that one has to obey the will of the Lord.

The community adheres to the severest Brahmanical restrictions concerning food and drink. A Gayawal is expected to dine only with his own community members, though the younger generation takes food with other people if the food is pukka, that is, cooked with clarified butter or ghee. The food should be cooked either by a member of the community or by a Brahman of the South, preferably by a Maharastrian Brahman, because these Brahmans are supposed to be most orthodox in maintaining the Vedic customs and traditions. The Gayawals must bathe before taking food and they should not touch any animal, paper, leather, or cotton between bathing and eating, and because of this they put on silk clothing when they go to eat.

Some of the younger Gayawals have started taking food in hotels and restaurants, but they do it quite secretly, and to them it is an experience. Furthermore, though Gayawals are not expected to eat meat, fish, or onion and garlic, some of them do eat these things, but never publicly. The orthodox among them do not accept drinking

¹ Written in 1949. Slightly edited, and footnotes added, by Marian W. Smith. References to the Rig Veda were made by the author.

² Crooke, 1907, p. 98. ³ *Ibid.* p. 100.