

Ceremonial Offerings and Religious Practices Among Taíno Indians: An Archaeological Investigation of Gourd Use in Taíno Culture

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ABSTRACT

In 1997 archaeologists working at La Aleta, a Taíno site in the Dominican Republic, recovered an incised gourd -- the first of its kind ever discovered -- from a ceremonial cenote (water-filled sinkhole). During the summer of 1998, I conducted six weeks of field research in the Dominican Republic to explore the religious and ceremonial meanings of this incised gourd. In this paper, I detail gourd use in Taíno creation myths, religious ceremonies, and in everyday life by placing these practices within a broader cross-cultural framework. I conclude that gourds emphasized the ever present duality in Taíno culture.

The Indians who welcomed Christopher Columbus to the island of Hispaniola in 1492 are known as the Taíno, meaning 'good' or 'noble' in their language (Conrad, Foster, & Beeker 1997). Other Caribbean natives began migration from the Yucatan in Mexico as early as 5,000 B.C. However, the Taínos, are the descendants of the 300 B.C. migration from the Orinoco River Valley in South America (Rouse 1992).

In the summer and fall of 1997, archaeologists investigated several Taíno sites in the Parque Nacional del Este of the Dominican Republic. These sites (La Aleta, La Laguña, and El Peñón) include several caves with rock art, both pictographs (paintings) and petroglyphs (incised carvings). Another unique discovery at La Aleta was a cenote, or water-filled sinkhole; the first ever discovered at a Taíno site. The artifacts recovered at La Aleta seem to be ritual offerings; they include ornate pottery, clubs and other wooden objects, baskets, and an incised gourd (Conrad, Foster, & Beeker 1997). It was this incised gourd that was the focus of my research. Knowledge of the full implications and use of gourds among Taíno Indians is still very much in its infancy. However, there is evidence of religious and ceremonial use.

For the Taíno, religion differed from the institutionalized faiths of modern society. "The world today is accustomed to separate realms for religion and science, church and state, theology and philosophy. But for the Taínos, religion assumed all of these functions through an interlocking system of symbols, rites, and beliefs" (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 53). For the Taíno, religion incorporated all aspects of life. The central focal point of Taíno religion was the practice of *cameism*. *Cemies* are small figurines fashioned out of stone, wood, shell and cotton. These figurines provided a physical representation of the Taíno cult of spirits.

They were a link between the psychic world of humans and nature. They helped explain the chaos of life through rituals of fertility, healing and divination, and the cult of ancestors. "The *cemies* served as sacred mediums allowing the power of the numinous to flow in two directions; from the spirit world out into human experience, and from human need into the cosmos" (Stevens-Arroyo 1988). *Cemies* were kept by all members of the society, but those belonging to the cacique (chief) or behique (shaman or priest) were believed to hold higher powers.

Cemies could only be constructed with the assistance of a behique. For instance, if a commoner was walking in the forest and came upon a tree which he/she thought held certain powers, he/she would call a behique to come from the village and perform a prescribed ceremony. If the tree was able to answer the behique's questions correctly and the ceremony was performed correctly, the person was able to cut the tree down and carve his/her *cemi* (Ramon Pane translated in Bourne 1907).

Communication with the *cemies* was often achieved via the use of a hallucinogenic drug, known as cohoba. This rite of using cohoba was clearly done for religious purposes. It allowed the participant to see beyond the normal.

Ordinary things receive new shapes and colors; the life in the inanimate becomes manifest; the immovable comes alive and discloses its hidden power. The use of drugs unleashes the psychic power of the religion. In times of crisis the believer communicates with the source of disturbance and finds answers to his questions. When use of this practice is integrated into a life style, one achieves wisdom. (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 67)

The practice of using cohoba was dangerous, and did not always help the participant achieve wisdom. Still, it was a very important religious practice which has its roots in Taíno mythology. It is believed that the cult of *cameism* included twelve *cemies*. Table 1 shows these *cemies* along with their mythological functions.

| Gender & Generation | Order of Fruitfulness | Order of Inversion |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Masculine | Yucahu[guamá]: Lord of the yuca plant; bitterness and strength; life of worker on earth; root symbolism | Maquetaurie Guayaba: Lord of the Dead; sweetness and delight; symbol of the guayaba berry, bat symbols |
| Twins Generated from the Masculine | Baibrama: Guardian of workers; fire to clear earth for planting of yuca; fire of oven form making <i>cazabe</i> Baraguabael: Guardian of plants, animals, and fish; replenisher of nature | Opiyelguobirán: Guardian of the Dead; privacy and felicity; Dog God Corocote: Guardian of sexual delight, romance, and spontaneity; picaresque spirit |
| Feminine | Attabeira: Fertilizing earth water in ponds, rivers, and lakes Earth and Serpent Mother, | Guabancex: Driver of wind and water, wind on sea, rider of the hurricane Mistress of the hurricane; the Amazon |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| | protectress of childbearing and lactation | Woman, menstruating, untamed, and indomitable |
| Twins Generated from the Feminine | Márohu: No Clouds, announces the sun | Guataúba: Thunder, announces the stormy rain |
| | Boinayel: Son of the Grey Serpent, clouds, announces the fertilizing rain | Coatrisquie: Carrier of water to the mountains, drifting storm clouds |

TABLE 1. Schema of Taíno Cemeism from Cave of the Jagua from Stevens-Arroyo (1988).

On Columbus' second voyage to Hispaniola, he commissioned a young friar, Ramon Pane, to live with the Taíno and record their myths, language, and daily activities. Pane's chronicle provides the best description of Taíno mythology. Many other scholars such as Las Casas (1971), Arrom (1977), Rouse (1992), Mendez (1972), and Stevens-Arroyo (1988) have provided excellent interpretations and insight into Pane's work. Pane recorded two myths that provide essential evidence of the importance of gourds in Taíno culture. Stevens-Arroyo labels the first myth, *The Banishment of Yayael*.

There was a man called Yaya, SPIRIT OF SPIRITS, and no one knew his name.

His son was named Yayael, [which means,] 'Son of Yaya.'

This Yayael was banished for wanting to kill his father.

Thus he was banished for four months.

Afterwards his father killed him, put his bones in a gourd and hung it from the roof of his house where it hung for some time.

It came to pass that one day, desiring to see his son, Yaya said to his wife, 'I want to see our son Yayael.'

This made her happy, and taking down the gourd, she turned it over to see the bones of their son.

From it gushed forth many fish, big and small.

Seeing that these bones had been turned into fishes, they decided to eat them. (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 88)

In analyzing the first two lines of this myth, Stevens-Arroyo draws from the field of Comparative Religions to establish a connection between Yaya in Taíno mythology and Yahweh in Judeo-Christian faith. Yaya's name is not known. This is similar to when Yahweh revealed himself to Moses as "I Am Who Am." "To belong only to oneself ... was equivalent to the omnipotence of a spirit not subject to the control of any other reality: in short, the Supreme Being" (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 89). This means Yaya is the Supreme Being in Taíno religion. *The Banishment of Yayael* is the Taíno creation story; it is

the foundation of Taíno religion.

The reference to the gourd in the creation story offers many interpretations. In practical use, the gourd is a storage container for food. Used as a food container, the gourd is a vessel for dead things. For example, a gourd may hold harvested fruits, nuts, and crops. In contrast, the gourd is also represented as a carrier of life. Like many religious and metaphysical symbols, the gourd has a dual purpose. As a carrier of life, the gourd is represented as a maraca. The gourd is a womb which carries seeds that represent a culturally symbolic musical instrument (Stevens-Arroyo 1988). When a gourd is used as a water container, it may also be considered a carrier of life. Without water there is no life. Unlike a harvested crop which must be uprooted from the earth and loses its life force, water is in a continuous state of living. This myth also contains cultural norms about faith.



FIGURE 1. Photos of the Tree Gourd, *Crescentia cujete*, or commonly called *Higuero*. I took these photos in the province of Higüey in the Parque Nacional Del Este

The Taíno creation myth also represents disbelief and a loss of faith.

When Yaya decides to take the gourd down from its perch and see his son, he terminates its function as storage bowl and allows its mana as maraca to begin. Since the maraca was used in the divination rites of the Taínos, I believe the desire to 'see' Yayael is a straightforward statement that Yaya was ritually invoking the spirit of his slain son. This desire, which is a serious religious undertaking, is misunderstood by the wife. Believing that Yayael is physically within the gourd, the woman is 'happy,' and in her eagerness to lay hold of it, she spills out its contents. (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 96)

When they realize that the contents of the gourd have been turned into fish, they surrender to the physical temptation and eat the fish. Stevens-Arroyo states that the use of the gourd for food represents a loss of faith. He also explains that the desire to eat their sons bones in the

gourd represents self-destruction.

In this first myth, gourds are represented as being both a tomb for dead things and a womb for living things. Gourds in the form of maracas are used in divination rites, while still others are used for food preparation, presentation and other daily activities. Next, I will examine the second myth, *Deminan and the Great Flood*. The gourd representation in this myth is similar to *The Banishment of Yayael*.

[It is said] one day, when Yaya had gone to his *cocucos*, [which means,] 'the lands that were his inheritance,' four sons came forth from one woman, who is named Itiba Cahubaba, THE BLEEDING ANCIENT ONE.

All came from the one womb and all were twins.

After dying in childbirth, the woman was cut open and they took out these four children.

The first taken out was *caracarcol*, [which means,] 'The Scabby One.'

Caracarcol had 'Deminan' for his name; the others did not have a name.

And while they were eating, they sensed that Yaya was returning from his lands.

While trying in their haste to hang up the gourd, they did not put it up securely, so it fell to the ground and broke apart.

[It is said] so much water came from that gourd that it covered the whole earth and from it came many fish.

[It is said] this is how the sea took its origin. (Stevens-Arroyo (1988) page 103)

In this myth, the gourd produces the sea and all of its life, unlike the first myth, when the gourd is simply turned over and fish gush out. In *Deminan and the Great Flood* the gourd is broken in two. Stevens-Arroyo states that the two halves of the gourd now serve as a canoe for the four brothers and carries them to far away shores. It is during this canoe trip that the four brothers learn the cultural norms of their society. In both myths the gourd is seen as a temptation; it is something sacred that should not be touched. When the gourd is touched, there are severe consequences.

The representation of gourds in mythology serves an integral function in many native myths throughout the world. In many cultures, gourds are mentioned in creation stories, hero and heroine legends, and fables which help to better human existence. Gourds have been part of native peoples' lives in South America, India, China, The Middle East, North America, and several other parts of the world.

From Togoland we learn of an old man with magical powers that enabled him to send out a gourd to search for food, which would always return filled. Among these people the gourd was a symbol of productivity. It became the magical possession of a woman after she reached puberty and was so sacred that it was

buried with her. (Heiser (1979) page 209)

Due to the hundreds of examples of gourds in mythology throughout the world, gourds in Taíno mythology are in no way odd or out of character. Rather than disproving the importance of gourds in Taíno mythology, the numerous examples give credibility to this interpretation.

Today, the most frequently occurring gourd in the Dominican Republic is the Tree Gourd, *Crescentia cujete*, more commonly called *Higuero* in Caribbean countries (Figure 1, Figure 2). Although we know there are many gourds on the island today,¹ it is difficult to establish their distribution at the time of conquest or earlier. It is only through the archaeological record, and textual works like Pane's, that we are able to determine that gourds were in abundance and served an important role in Taíno life.



FIGURE 2. Photos of the Tree Gourd, *Crescentia cujete*, or commonly called *Higuero*. I took these photos in the province of Higüey in the Parque Nacional Del Este

The Taíno used gourds for many daily activities. For example, they used gourds for hunting waterfowl. They would place gourds in the water as decoys so the waterfowl would land on or near them. Once the waterfowl became used to the presence of gourds in the water, the Taíno would strap gourds on top of their head and slowly enter the water. They would swim among the birds and floating gourds without being spotted. Then, they would grab the waterfowl by the neck or the feet and drown them.² Gourds were also used for containers. The Taíno used them for food storage, washing food, drinking and holding water. Furthermore, they were used as eating utensils, and the contents of certain gourds were used in making beverages. It is my belief that gourds used in the examples stated above held no particular religious or ceremonial value. However, we must not forget that the Taíno religious system employed the philosophical notion of dualism.

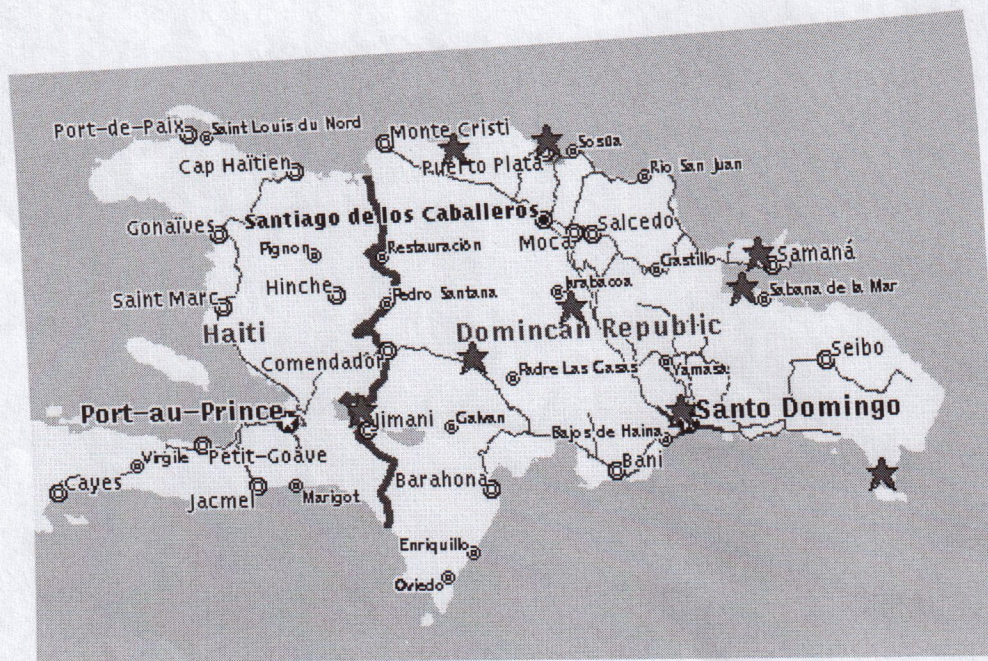


FIGURE 3. A map of the Dominican Republic with my places of research represented by the starred areas.
<http://www.mapquest.com>

Dualism is found in the Taíno cult of *cameism*. Dualism is also represented in their artifacts. Both in rock art and in clay pottery and figurines, images of two faces either looking in different directions, or one on top of the other as represented in pictographs and petroglyphs, express this belief in dualism. It is because of this notion of dualism that gourds in Taíno culture were able to acquire both a functional and a religious meaning.

The maraca was most definitely a religious symbol. Maracas were used in large religious ceremonies known as *areytos*. Areytos took place in the main plaza in a Taíno village. They celebrated marriage, death, and united people in the aftermath of great natural disasters. These ceremonies lasted for hours and were marked by drinking, feasting and dancing. “The songs related the histories of caciques, their communities, and their ancestors, and the gods and mythology of the Taíno ... Areytos served to teach children and to reinforce for adults the history, customs, and mores of Taíno society” (Alegria (1998) page 11). The maraca is one example of gourds as a religious symbol. The other is MLA #8, a one of a kind artifact. It is an intricately designed gourd found at a depth of 126 ft. at La Aleta by researchers at Indiana University Bloomington (Figure 4). The carbon-14 date on MLA #8 is: cal AD 1020 to 1180 (Figure 5).

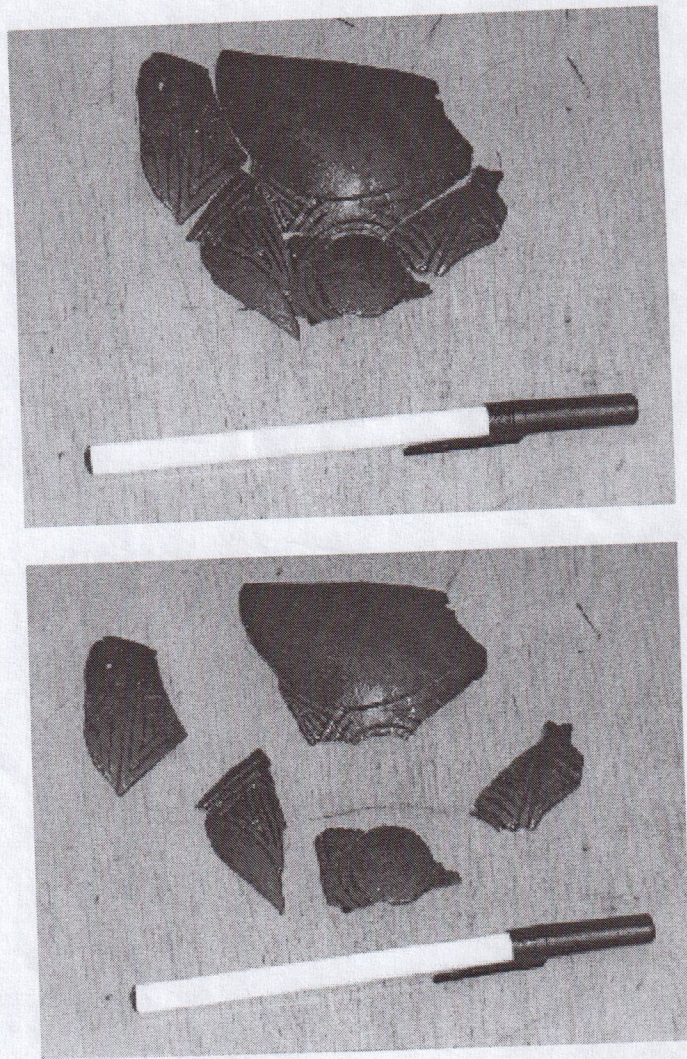


FIGURE 4. I took this photo at the William Mathers Museum at Indiana University Bloomington. Courtesy of Geoff Conrad, director.

Decorating gourds is a secular activity in most places today, but it could well be that it owes its origin to magico-religious motives. The gourd was most important to primitive people, and thus became incorporated in their religious observances. (Heiser (1979) page 161)

The significance of the decorative designs which adorn MLA #8 is rather interesting. Gourds are fragile. The reason they were widely used in daily activities is because of their abundance and natural geometric shape. Why would one take the necessary time, talent and resources that are needed to make a beautifully incised gourd, if it is to be used as a water vessel or food container and its life expectancy is relatively brief? This leads me to believe that the carvings on MLA #8 distinguish it as a special gourd used only in religious ceremonies.

MLA #8 also has a small hole near the rim. "The spiral design is intricately formed and exactly executed. The gourd was cut, polished, and apparently suspended by line through holes drilled through the rim" (Elpidio Ortega (1996) found in Foster & Beeker (1997) page

30). As mentioned earlier, Taíno creation myths tell us of a suspended gourd in the house of Yaya, the Spirit of Spirits. It is my belief that MLA #8 is a symbolic representation of the gourds of Taíno mythology and may also be a direct representation of gourds used in Taíno burial rites. Although there is no textual proof that the Taínos used gourds for holding the bones of the deceased, this practice does appear in the mythology.

| | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Laboratory: | |
| Number | β -107023 |
| Conventional radiocarbon age: | 640 \pm BP |
| Calibrated results: (2 Σ , 95% probability) | cal AS 1020 to 1180 |

| | |
|--|---|
| Intercepts of radiocarbon age with calibration curve: | cal AD 1045 and cal AD 1105 and cal AD 1115 |
| 1 Σ calibrated results: (68% probability) | cal AD 1035 to 1165 |

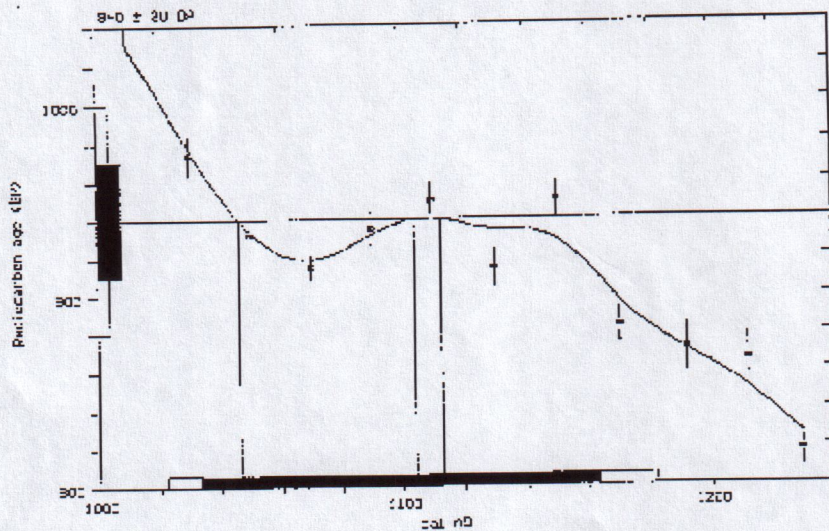


FIGURE 5. Calibration of radiocarbon age to calendar years (Vogel (1993); Talma (1993); Stuiver (1993)). Carbon dated by Beta Analytic Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory (Miami, Florida).

It is also possible that MLA #8 was a container for the prized hallucinogenic drug, cohoba, which was used in religious ceremonies as a means of contacting the *cemies*. For this hypothesis to be accepted or disproved, further analysis of MLA #8 must be undertaken. If traces of cohoba are found on the inside of the gourd, these results could aid in proving this hypothesis. All the possibilities that MLA #8 held religious value are enhanced by the very

fact that this gourd was discovered in Manantial de la Aleta. Foster and Becker (1997) wrote, "Manantial de la Aleta demonstrates the Taíno practice of making ceremonial offerings." Due to the numerous artifacts discovered, it is theorized that Manantial de la Aleta was used in religious ceremonies.

By participating in the Bloomington Archaeological Field School, interviewing Taíno scholars, observing excavations, investigating rock art, visiting museums, and analyzing texts on Taíno culture, I conclude that within Taíno culture there existed a realm for gourds in both religious and functional activities. The gourd had an integral function in the Taíno religious system and is the very basic element within the foundation of Taíno mythology. Furthermore, the gourd was used in elaborate religious ceremonies as a symbolic musical instrument, and a ceremonial container for cohoba. Lastly, gourds emphasized the duality which characterized Taíno culture.

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¹ During my travels in the Dominican Republic, I was unable to locate any documentation with reference to the distribution of gourds on the island. To my knowledge, no one has undertaken the immense task of compiling an inventory of gourds in the Dominican Republic. I visited nearly the whole island (Figure 3), and saw numerous tree gourds and several varieties of bottle gourds. In addition, I was able to interview agriculture specialists and employees of environmental agencies, who all speculated that the presence of gourds on the island was pervasive.

² This story was told to me by Gabriel Atilas, a Dominican archaeologist working for the Museo del Hombre Dominicano in Santo Domingo. After talking with Gabriel, I was also

able to locate similar stories in several texts.

RYAN MARTIN is a Sociology major with minors in both Anthropology and History. Ryan will graduate this spring and plans to attend graduate school to study Nautical Archaeology. He received a SMART summer fellowship to attend the Bloomington Archaeological Field School. This paper represents his findings. Ryan presented this research at the IUSB Undergraduate Research Conference in March 1999 and at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research held in Rochester, New York in April 1999.



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