

## **CLASSIC TAINO SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

--Lynne Guitar

For the Taínos, every living thing in creation, not just people and animals, but also trees and rivers and rocks, has a *goeiz*, a soul, and the *goeiz* of everything that passes on becomes an *opia* (or *hupia*). The Taínos are the "Indians" who were living on Quisqueya (Hispaniola, which is shared today by the Dominican Republic and Republic of Haiti), Borinquen (Puerto Rico), Cuba, Jamaica and the Lucayos (Bahamas) when Christopher Columbus and his three small ships full of Europeans first arrived in the Caribbean in 1492. (The Taínos used to be called Island Arawaks until archaeologist Irving Rouse pointed out what a misnomer it was, for the Taínos and mainland Arawaks are only very distantly related kin.) Although there were once several million Taínos on the core island of Hispaniola alone--demographers have argued for 500 years over numbers that range from less than a million to twenty million for the Taíno population on Hispaniola in 1492--a myth arose that the Taínos were wiped out within a few generations of the Europeans' arrival. It's true that traditional Taíno society was dismantled by the Spanish conquest and colonization, with their attendant battles, plagues and abuses, but significant numbers of Taínos survived in the peripheral regions of the islands. They survived even in the very midst of the Spanish ranches, plantations, towns and cities, where they and their children "passed" as Spaniards. Although no one in the modern Caribbean speaks Taíno nor lives exactly like the Classic Taínos did, Taínos have made a strong mark on the faces and cultures of the modern-day peoples of the

Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and southern Cuba, where the original Taíno population was densest. There is a Taíno revival movement based out of New York/New Jersey and Puerto Rico that is growing stronger every year.

Multifaceted, the principle goals of those connected to the movement are to research, compile and recover Taíno language and culture, and to rekindle Nativist pride in all those of Taíno background.

The word "taíno" appears to be a shortened version of *nitaíno*, which is what the Indians called out when European ships approached. Perhaps they meant to imply by this that they were "nobles," for that is the word's most frequently accepted meaning. It is more likely, however, that they meant they were "not cannibals," which is another of the meanings for the word "nitaíno," and it is the way that most Spaniards who followed Columbus to the region used the term in the extant histories and documents. One thing we know for certain is that "Taíno" was *not* a collective name that these indigenous people had for themselves. Rather, they appear to have identified themselves by individual *yucayeque* (population center) and by *cazicazgo*, the extent of the region under the control of a particular *cacique* (chief). Their languages were significantly different from *cazicazgo* to *cazicazgo*, but mutually comprehensible, which has led to the as-yet-unresolved debate as to whether the Guanahatabeys (also called Ciboneyes) of northeastern Hispaniola were a separate people from the Taínos. In addition to language differences, the Taínos' economic base, agricultural base, and techniques of cultivation were slightly different from *cazicazgo* to *cazicazgo*. Designs of both domestic and elite products varied from

cazicazgo to cazicazgo, too, but Taíno spiritual beliefs and practices appear to have been relatively uniform and widespread.



ig 1, Peopling Carib. Map.JPG

## CARIBBEAN NATIVE PEOPLING SEQUENCE

- 1) Guanahatabeys, also called Ciboneys, a hunting-and-gathering people whose food base was fish and shellfish (though some also say they hunted the Giant Sloth and are the cause of its extinction in the Greater Antilles), migrated by canoe from the Yucatán Peninsula to Cuba, then to Quisqueya, beginning around 5,000-4,000 B.C.
- 2) An unnamed hunting-and-gathering people (Ortoiroid culture) migrated from the Orinoco River Valley of South America, canoeing north and northwest up the chain of the Antillean Islands to Borinquen beginning about 3,000-2,000 B.C. They reached the Mona Passage between Borinquen and Quisqueya around 1,000 B.C., but do not appear to have crossed the passage for nearly 2,000 years, though they probably established trade relations with the Guanahatabeys there.
- 3) About the year Christ was born, Pre-Igneris, the Caribbean's first agriculturalists, began migrating up the Antillean chain from the Orinoco River Valley, reaching Borinquen around 400-300 B.C., no doubt conquering and/or intermarrying with the previous settlers from the same continental region, who had inhabited the islands by then for approximately 2,000 years. The two peoples merged to develop into the agricultural people and culture called Igneri.
- 4) By A.D. 950, the Igneris had crossed the formerly stable frontier at the Mona Passage and had begun to settle Quisqueya, no doubt conquering and/or intermarrying with the Guanahatabeys, who had inhabited Quisqueya by then for approximately 5,000 years. In the process they developed the agricultural techniques, artistic traditions, and other rituals and beliefs that today are identified as Classic Taíno. The Taíno people and culture evolved on Quisqueya—they were a mixture of the genes and cultures of at least three distinct peoples. The Taínos' cultural traditions then spread back to Borinquen, for the Mona Passage had become an open channel, not a barrier.
- 5) The Taíno population grew rapidly, no doubt due to their efficient agricultural and fishing techniques. They spread across Quisqueya and Borinquen, then began migrating to Cuba, to the Lucayos (today's Bahamas), and to Jamaica.
- 6) The last wave of natives to sweep up the Antillean Chain from the Orinoco River Valley region was a people whom the Taínos called Caribes. By 1492, the Caribes had reached today's Virgin Islands, which was the frontier between the two native peoples—they were bitter enemies fighting for the islands' resources when the Europeans arrived.

In order to understand Taíno spiritual beliefs and practices, it is necessary to first understand their lifestyle and social structure. The people and the culture that we call Taíno did not reach the Greater Antilles by canoe, their ancestors did (see Peopling Map above). The Taíno culture developed en situ, characterized archaeologically by recognizable agricultural technologies and artistic features.

The most advanced agricultural features of the Classic Taíno culture appear to have arisen in the northern valleys of Hispaniola's Cibao, where the people developed a truly sedentary style of agriculture based not on the tropical forest technique of shifting plots cleared by slash-and-burn, but on a type of prepared mound agriculture. Their specially constructed agricultural fields were called *conucos*, which consisted of a number of knee-high mounds about eight to nine feet in circumference. Just as their ancestors had done in the island's earlier slash-and-burn gardens, Taínos grew multiple crops on their conucos. Multiple cropping provides ground cover, which helps reduce weed growth, moisture loss and soil erosion. The Taínos' conucos were more productive and fertile for longer periods than slash-and-burn gardens, but constructing the mounded fields required a considerable investment in time and labor. For both of these reasons, the Taínos were basically stable. Another thing that stabilized the Taínos was that once crops of bitter yucca, their primary crop, were established (about one year from the time pieces of root were planted) harvesting was continuous over a period of several years. And the conucos required only

occasional weeding and pest removal. There was no need to build storage barns, either, for the yucca could be left in the ground until needed.

Having a stable food base allowed the populations in central Hispaniola to expand exponentially. Archaeologists have found evidence of their expansion and increasing intensification of sedentary food production, which are reflected in the Taínos' increased use of *burenes* (the griddles on which they cooked *cassabe*, the bread they made of bitter yucca) and in the remains of larger, more densely populated sedentary villages. Meanwhile, a cultural subgroup called Chican (after archaeological finds in the Boca Chica region just east of today's capital of Santo Domingo) brought pottery making to its height. Chican styles have elaborately incised designs that appear to symbolize cemíes—these were the Taíno's "gods" (more about cemíes below). By A.D. 950, the agricultural advancements and artistic advancements had spread, culminating in the culture known today as Classic Taíno.

Classic Taíno peoples are characterized not only by their advanced forms of agriculture and art, but also by large sedentary villages averaging 500-1,000 inhabitants—but with some much larger. The *bohios* (standard houses) encircled a *batey* ("plaza" or "playing field") in a manner that the Spaniards described as "disorganized," but which was probably based on closeness of kin relationship to the cacique. Facing the batey was the *cacique's* ("chief's") special house, which was also a kind of temple, called a *caney*. The caciques wielded a considerable amount of both political and spiritual power. At the time of the Spaniards' arrival, the principal caciques of Hispaniola apparently were consolidating and

expanding their power. Had they not been interrupted, the individual cacicazgos would no doubt have soon been merged into a state-level society like that of the Aztecs or Incas.

While not as intricately stratified nor as rigidly organized as the Aztecs and Incas, the Taínos had at least two distinct social classes, *nitaínos* and *naborías*. These were relatively equivalent to the "noble" and "commoner" classes with which Europeans were familiar. Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the *naboría* class. *Naborías* may have been descendants of "less pure" kinship lines, i.e., descendants of Guanahatabey or the unnamed Indians of the second wave (see Peopling Map), or of kinship lines not as crafty in statesmanship as others. *Naborías* were described as the workers among the Taínos, less privileged than the *nitaíno* class. For example, they ate bread made of corn, while the *nitaínos* ate cassabe, and they slept on the ground, while *nitaínos* slept in cotton hammocks. We do not know, however, if *naboría* houses were relegated to the periphery of the village, if *naborías* participated in the "communal" *areitos* ("dances/songs"), or what kind of work, exactly, was designated as too lowly for *nitaínos* to do--manatee hunting, for example, might have been seen as a prestige activity, not as "work." Scholars such as Puerto Rico's Jalil Sued-Badillo maintain that all the Taínos' food production--including planting, hunting, fishing and gathering/collecting--was done communally, but that the caciques and their families reserved all the best for themselves.

Spanish chroniclers recorded far more information about the *nitaínos* than about *naborías*. They were particularly fascinated by the *caciques* and *behiques*

(closest English equivalent to the latter is "shaman"), whose families appear to have comprised the nitaíno class. There is no clear indication that merchants or artisans were included in the nitaíno class, nor that there was a permanent priesthood, although greater levels of specialization and stratification may have been developing in the core regions by 1492.

### The caciques

There was a clear hierarchy among the Taíno caciques. Some were more like *principales* or "headmen," holding authority only in a particular *yucayeque* ("village"). Other caciques held authority over several politically connected *yucayeques*--which together was called their *cacicazgo*. The most important caciques, whom anthropologists call paramount caciques, held authority over *cacicazgos* that encompassed large territories in which there were many *yucayeques* and many subsidiary caciques.

The caciques used marriage alliances to expand their *cacicazgos*. The preferred successor was the son of the cacique's eldest sister. If none of his sisters' sons were available, a sister herself could rule (a *cacica*) or the cacique's own biological son. In ascending order, the Taíno terms for the various levels of caciques were *guaoxerí*, *baharí*, and *matunherí*.

When a potential successor to a *cacicazgo* was born, neighboring caciques welcomed the baby with gifts at a special *areíto* in his honor. The gifts included not only high-status material goods but also gifts of songs and names. Each name had religious and political significance. Samuel Wilson has

suggested that the cacique's numerous names each contained elements of his "pedigree" (117). The most prominent, most politically and socially active caciques, therefore, would have had the longest string of names. The chronicler Pedro Martyr wrote that Behecchio, the cacique of Jaraguá at the time of the Spaniards' arrival (Behecchio was the most powerful of the paramount caciques), had more than forty names, all of which were to be recited by heralds whenever he proclaimed an order. Among these names were Tareigua Hobin, which meant "prince resplendent as copper"; Starei, which meant "shining"; Huibo, "haughtiness"; and Duyheiniquem, "rich river." If even one of the forty-plus names were omitted by the herald "through carelessness or neglect... the cacique would feel himself grievously outraged" (Vol. 1, 386-387)

There appear to have been five paramount caciques on Hispaniola when Columbus arrived in 1492, perhaps six. The questionable one, Guacanagarí, was a cacique living near where Columbus's flagship, the *Santa María*, wrecked itself upon a reef on Christmas Eve 1492--and where Fort La Navidad was built out of the ship's wreckage. Guacanagarí may have gained a status approximating that of a paramount cacique due to his association with the exotic strangers from a distant land, strangers who might even have been considered gods, at least at first. It is difficult to gauge what his status may have been before "the encounter" in late 1492 (Helms 728).

Elite collusion, then, was another strategy used by the Taíno elite to attain and expand upon their privileged status. Succession to leadership was not simply a matter of heredity: "[H]e who would be a successful chief may overtly

have had to express the inherent energies and capabilities by which (along with genealogical legitimacy) he was presumed fit for office," writes Mary W. Helms (728). Chroniclers made reference to Taíno caciques, at various times, using all of the common tools of diplomatic maneuvering that Old World elites used, including gift exchange, marriage strategies, war alliances, and another form of fictive kinship that is uniquely Taíno, the exchange of names called *nataio* or *guatiao*. The reciprocal responsibilities of those who exchanged names, who became *guatiao*, were similar to those of the blood-brother relationships among North American Indians or the relationships among baptismal *compadres* in Latin America.

Successful caciques were accorded many privileges of rank, with the more powerful caciques garnering more privileges. The chroniclers all recorded that, instead of living in a common round bohío, caciques lived in special rectangular houses/temples called caneys facing the village's central batey. And caciques had multiple wives—Behecchio of Jaraguá had thirty. Select foods, such as the meat of the iguana and manatee, were reserved for the exclusive use of caciques. They had special clothes and accessories that set them apart from others--brilliant capes of parrot feathers; carved, gold-and-pearl-embellished masks, crowns and pendants, and elaborate belts. While all the other Taínos sat on the ground, caciques sat elevated above them on elaborately carved and polished wooden *dujos* (low, intricately carved seats or benches). Caciques had elaborately decorated canoes, too, some of which that could hold hundreds of people; when on land, some caciques were carried about on litters. Caciques

were buried in caves, which were frequently decorated with petroglyphs and pictographs, or at other prestige burial sites, and their corpses were accompanied by elaborate grave goods. Sometimes a caciques's favorite wife was buried with him--alive.

All of the caciques' special privileges and accoutrements were symbols of their awesome spiritual and political power. The caciques who were able to communicate with the most powerful cemies were those who held the most political power. The cemies were the caciques' supernatural advisors, their supernatural allies. With the help of his cemies, a cacique decided what was appropriate propitiation to the spirits and when it was the proper time to hold a ritual or celebration. In addition to being the Taínos' spiritual leader, the cacique made the day-to-day decisions about labor: he decided who was to be a hunter, a fisherman or cultivator; when new fields were to be cleared, planted, cared for, or harvested; when to build a new canoe or go on a turtle hunt. The caciques also received tribute from the people under them, which the chronicler Bartolomé de las Casas wrote was called *cacoma* (Historia, Vol. 2, 113). Martyr noted that the Cacica Anacaona (she inherited the cacicazgo in Jaraguá from her brother, the paramount Cacique Behechchio) had a "treasure," a collection of prestige goods that she had received as tribute that included dujos, carved wooden bowls, large balls of spun cotton, and the cotton skirts called *naguas* that the elite Taíno women wore after they were married (Vol. 1, 125). The caciques' symbolic role as distributor of cassabe, which was celebrated with an elaborate annual *areito* wherein he received the first bread made from a new harvest and then

redistributed it, is indicative that they were, in fact, controlling food tribute and redistributing the surplus. Or it may be that the tribute was not accorded to the caciques, per se, but to their spiritual doubles, their powerful cemies.

### The behiques

The myth of Guaguyona reveals significant information about *behiques* (also written as *bohutis*, *buhuitus*, *buhitihus* or similar spellings). Behiques were healers and they shared spiritual leadership with the caciques. Fray Ramon Pané, under orders from Christopher Columbus, recorded the myth, among other observations about Taíno creation legends and spiritual beliefs. Guaguyona was a culture hero who became the Taínos' first behique when he was reborn on the island of Guanín after an illness, from whence he brought the first gold and other objects to the *lokono* (the "people"). Guaguyona was also known as the "unifier of the East with the West," which may be why behiques, not caciques, were the officiators at the Taínos' bateyes, their ballgames. Spaniards denigrated the behiques in their chronicles, representing their religious functions as demon inspired and their cures as hoaxes. Martyr wrote: "These men, who are persistent liars, act as doctors for the ignorant people, which gives them great prestige, for it is believed that the cemies converse with them and reveal the future to them" (Vol. 1, 172).

Working hand in hand, then, with their spiritual advisors, behiques most frequently healed with herbs and potions, ground up using special ritual mortars and pestles, with massages, with the music of sacred maracas, special songs

and incantations, tobacco smoke, and “by adoration,” as historian Carlos Deive Esteban phrases it. That is, they spoke with the spirit that was causing an illness, after first fasting, purging and inhaling *cohoba* to induce a trance state, during which they asked the spirit what it wanted. The spirits most frequently responded that they were angry because they had not received their share of the food, had not been treated with the proper respect, or had had no shrine constructed in their honor and remembrance. Once the spirit was appeased by doing what it requested, the patient's illness would disappear (“Chamanismo” 83). Behiques also healed by removing polluting objects from a patient's body that had been "sent" by spirits or by rival behiques. It was these healings, in which the object was "magically" sucked or massaged out of the patient's body, that the Spaniards perceived to be outright shams, for they frequently caught the behiques palming the objects beforehand. Perhaps the Taínos, like anthropologist Dale A. Olsen found among the modern-day Warao of Venezuela, did not consider the behique to be a charlatan at all because the object, which they knew he had beforehand, "is not the complete object until its spiritual essence [or positive balance] has been restored to it" by the healer--which is what effects the cure (226-228).

The Taínos held the behique in awe because of his healing abilities, but healing was also the most dangerous of the behiques' many roles. If a noble patient died, the behique who couldn't cure him was put to death. Pané describes in gruesome detail how breaking his legs, arms and head with sticks was not enough to kill a behique, for spirits in the form of snakes would take

possession and heal his body. To make sure he was dead, after beating him, you had to tear out his eyes and crush his testicles (52).

Behiques were far more than just healers. As spiritual leader, they may have been as important to the success of a cacicazgo as the cacique. Robiou Lamarche suggests that the cacique and behique were complementary pairs, with the cacique representing the powers of the sun, and the behique the powers of the moon (58-59)). Behiques were renowned for their ability to communicate with the souls of the recently dead, in much the same way that caciques were renowned for communicating with the Taínos' legendary hero and creator cemies. (The two kinds of spiritual entities were not quite the same, although both were venerated.) The behique acted as a spiritual advisor to the cacique, as mediator during the Taínos' ballgames, and as the "court diviner," in addition to his many other roles. His most secret and powerful rituals appear to have been conducted in caves, where the spirits of the dead were believed to reside. The pictographs and petroglyphs in the caves throughout Hispaniola are dominated by vivid images of bats and owls, the creatures of the caves who were associated with the spirits of the ancestors, with birds and insects, representing terrestrial life, and faces/heads of all shapes and sizes, suggesting that the spiritual essence of man is in his head. The behique mediated among them all.

In addition to being the Taínos' liturgical experts, diviners, teachers, pharmacists, herbal healers and surgeons, behiques most likely also directed the craftsmanship of cemies and other sacred art. They may have been the artists who created the pictographs and petroglyphs found in caves and on exposed

rocks all around the island. The behiques' art would have reinforced their position as both teacher and liturgical expert. Some caves appear to have been devoted to ensuring successful hunts, others to childbirth and courtship; others may have been devoted to specific ceremonies and/or to specific cemies. Some rocks with deeply etched pictographs appear to be teaching tools. For example, there is one on the surface in the Bocu Yuma region with life-sized figures that seem to illustrate the spiritual interpretation of how procreation results from the combination of male and female.

For the Taínos, the profusion of symbols and representations that surrounded them was both a constant reminder of the society's values and beliefs, and a basic explanation of the complex magico-religious world that was all around them, but with which only the caciques and behiques could communicate on a regular basis. Successful behiques "were held in veneration... like saints," the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés wrote (Book 6, Chp.1). They were granted privileges nearly equal to those of the caciques, including prestige foods, distinguishing clothes and adornments. Oviedo says they dressed in black cloth and covered their bodies with paintings of cemies.

### Gender roles

Jalil Sued-Badillo has been criticized for exaggerating and romanticizing gender equality among the Classic Taínos; among other things, he and other academics point out that Taíno women could even inherit the role of cacica, leader of the cacicazgo. On the opposing side, academics such as Ricardo E.

Alegría argue that Taíno women did not succeed to the position of cacica until after the arrival of Europeans, which disrupted normal indigenous patterns of succession. Nonetheless, Taíno society was quite likely far more gender equal than, for example, Spanish society at the turn of the sixteenth century, as it is in many societies below the state level of socio-political organization. This is indicated by the importance of matrilineal inheritance patterns and the prominence given female images among the Taínos' myths and socio-religious symbols.

The importance of the female for her reproductive capacity in association with the land and fertility was celebrated by the Taínos since antiquity, as evidenced throughout their myths. "The trinity of woman-land-moon," Sued-Badillo writes, "has a wide diffusion in Prehispanic America," as it does in most agricultural societies (21). The Taíno reckoned the passage of time by the phases of the moon, and planted crops at the time of the new moon, which strengthens the principles cementing the triad of symbols, for not only is timekeeping a wondrous, "magical" thing in most societies, but women's menses are also in tempo with the phases of the moon.

Women figure prominently in the ancient myths, but the majority of the symbolic images representing the various Taíno cemíes are male, perhaps a reflection of a growing cult of male ancestor/cemí worship that Irving Rouse has seen evidenced in the material record from about 1200 A.D. Nonetheless, figurines of gravid women are prevalent among the Taíno artifacts collected by archaeologists over the years, and petroglyphs of Atabeyra, mother of the

Taínos' most important cemí, Yúcahu (the god of yucca), are prominent at the largest and most complex of the batey sites so far discovered in the Caribbean, a site near Utuado on Puerto Rico called the Caguana Ceremonial Indian Park. According to Pané, both Atabeyra and her son, Yúcahu, were known by multiple names--she was Atabex, Iermao, Guacar, Apito and Zuímaco; he was Yúcahu, Vagua and Maórocoti. Since multiple names among the Taíno were indications of high rank and accomplishments, scholars such as Sued-Badillo and Eugenio Fernández Méndez have speculated that the mother's having more names than the son is indicative of the importance attached to the female line by the Taínos. Fernández Méndez also suggests that the "primordial pair" represented by Atabeyra and her son (Pané wrote that Yúcahu had no father) represented "both the duality and the unity" inherent not only in gender, but in all things among the Taíno (29).

The prominence of Atabeyra's images at Caguana Ceremonial Indian Park may even indicate a rising symbolic importance granted to high-ranking females, both those living and dead-but-revered-as-cemies, much like what happened in Europe with the elevation of heroic queen figures and the Virgin Mary in the 1400s. We know that, by the time Europeans arrived, or shortly thereafter, *bateyes* (Taíno ball games) were frequently played with teams of married women v. single women, or women v. men--but women hit the balls with their knees and clenched fists, while men used their hips and buttocks. There were female warriors, female artisans, female leaders of areitos, and possibly cacicas and female behiques among the Taínos.

Some of the Taínos' activities, however, appear to have been restricted to males, such as the gathering of gold and the cohoba ritual. Sued-Badillo points out, however, that both activities included women in the preparations. The Taíno men who went to gather gold, for example, first had to abstain from sex for twenty days, perhaps as a sacrifice to or symbolic union with Guabonito, the mythological "goddess" who created gold. In the cohoba ritual, women were in attendance on the male cacique and his senior counsellors.

But what about gender roles in the day-to-day activities of the Taínos? We know that Taíno women were responsible for the usual domestic activities that women are responsible for worldwide--childbearing, childcare, food conservation and preparation. Sued-Badillo's research indicates that they were also responsible for the preparation of medicines and poisons, as well for domestic pottery, textiles and basketry (33-36)--but we do not know to what extent the nitaíno women shared these daily roles with naboría women. Nor do we know to what extent men and women may have shared responsibilities such as the production of pottery and textiles for ceremonial use or for commercial trade, the clearing of fields for conucos (a laborious task), the sowing, weeding and harvesting of crops, building houses, constructing canoes, etc. Several of the chroniclers mention both men and women working together to gather fish, but this might have been only at particular times of the year, when fish were spawning, for example, and the labor of the entire village was needed to reap the harvest. The Cacica Anacaona told Bartolomé Colón that women were the expert sculptors of the prized wooden objects (Martyr, Vol. 1, 125). Were there

special ceramics, textiles and straw art that were made only by women? Or only by men? Were there "men's gardens" where ritual herbs like tobacco and those used in the cohoba ritual were grown? Did women have their own secret gardens for medicinal plants that only they knew how to grow, prepare and use?

One thing that is particularly striking is that most scholars who study the Taínos (overwhelmingly male) have attributed the "rise" of the Taínos to "the ease" with which they could harvest an abundant crop of yucca once they had mastered the conuco technique. Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo, for example, says that the vast amounts of yucca grown by the Taíno "liberated" them "from the sporadic foraging of hunters and gatherers, permitting them to develop newly specialized forms of economic and social organization" (45). Sued-Badillo agrees, adding that "the progressive liberation of the work force from the chores of" food production permitted the Taínos to develop artisanal specialization, which he says was primarily in the female domain. He points out that the province of Jaraguá, which Las Casas called "the court of this island," was so advanced that it innovated new technologies, such as methods of irrigation, which provided a substantial increase in food production (14-15).

There is a major problem with this rosy view of the benefits the Taínos reaped by an increasingly large supply of bitter yucca. Anthropologists who have studied living peoples dependent upon cassabe have found that the women live lives of self-described drudgery, saying that they are "enslaved" to the complicated, time-consuming process of washing, grating and extracting the poisonous juices from the yucca root (a cyanic acid known as *manihotoxina*) and

the other procedures to make bread. After the grated pulp has been squeezed in an ingenious contraption called a *cibucán*, the women must spread it out to dry into flour, gather it, store it and, when ready to cook the cassabe, mix the ingredients, knead the dough, shape the loaves, prepare the fire and the *buren* ("griddle"), cook the loaves, then set them out to dry before serving them. And do not forget all the work needed to make the scrapers, graters, filters, bottles, jars, bowls, baskets, knives, cibucanes and burenes needed to prepare and store not only yucca flour, but all the other foodstuffs as well.

If it is true that the Taínos were in the process of switching from a varied diet to one that relied predominantly on cassabe made from bitter yucca, as so many investigators have theorized, then perhaps the ritual or symbolic elevation of women seen in the Taínos' material artifacts was to compensate for a devolution of women's day-to-day equality with males, who alone were becoming more liberated than previously. In fact, equality between the sexes may have been less and less pronounced among the Taínos as they evolved toward a state-level political structure. Live interment of the wives of deceased caciques, for example, appears to have been a new practice in the fifteenth century, part of the Taínos' "increasing trajectory toward stratification" (Sued-Badillo 44). And while polygamous practices inspired artisanal specialization among the nitaíno women, they also represented justification for the exploitation of those women.

There is much work still to be done on gender and the Taínos. If the status of women was devolving as the Taínos approached state level, it may not have affected all women. Taíno patterns might have followed those which the

Mexica or Incan societies did as they evolved--nitaíno women among the Taínos might have enjoyed "parallel" or "complementary" roles to those of the high-ranking males. At the very least, however, the lives of the naboría females must have been getting progressively worse as more and more of their waking hours and energy were devoted to the onerous tasks involved in the production of cassabe.

### **--Taíno religious and artistic expression--**

As difficult as it is to separate religion and spirituality from the socio-political aspects of the Classic Taíno way of life, it is nearly impossible to separate Taíno spiritual concepts from their art. Fray Ramón Pané, sent to live among them in 1493 in order to record their religious beliefs, encountered what he described as a confusing profusion of spirits that walked in the night, along with legendary and mythological "gods," anthropomorphic beings, "living" trees and stones, and ancestral remains--skulls or other bones or body parts, desiccated bodies, etc.--that the Taínos adored. (An English translation of Pané's *Relación* is embedded in Ferdinand Colón's *Life of the Admiral*.)

### Cemies

Although Pané and most of the other chroniclers wrote that the Taínos "worshipped" and "adored" cemies, "celebrated" or "prized" might be better verb choices. Consider how Christians celebrate and prize the cross and crucifix symbols, but do not adore them or worship them, *per se*. Understanding how the Classic Taínos conceptualized cemies is complicated by the fact that when the

Táinos spoke of *cemies*, the term appears to have encompassed two separate-but-linked concepts: 1) a spiritual being, a complementary counterpart or double, who acted as advisor to and protector of an earthly being, and 2) the physical manifestation or symbol of that spiritual being on earth. Las Casas wrote, “I asked the Indians several times: ‘Who is this *cemí* that you call upon?’ And they responded: ‘It is the one who makes it rain and makes the sunshine and gives us children and other good things that we want’” (*Apologética*, Vol. 3, Chp. 166, 1152).

The earthly manifestation of the *cemí* who was Yúcahu, the spirit of the yucca, for example, was embodied in the numerous three-pointed stones the Spaniards call *trigonalitos* that the Táinos made of clay, stone, bone, shell and, perhaps, other less durable materials. At least some of these were buried in the *conucos* when the yucca was planted, in a ritual no doubt intended to increase and/or to protect the crop. But not all stone *cemies* were representations of Yúcahu. Columbus himself noted that there were three different kinds of stone *cemies*, each used for a different purpose:

[M]ost of the caciques have each three stones, for which they and their people feel great devotion. According to them, one of these stones helps the grains and vegetables grow, the second helps women give birth without pain, and the third secures rain or fair weather when they are in need of either. (Colón 152)

Stone images of cemíes have been recovered that are not three-pointed. Predominant among them are heads in various shapes and sizes, for the Taínos appear to have believed that the essence of a human being was in the head. There is even one surviving example of a cotton cemí in the form of a "doll," inside of which is a human skull, no doubt that of a revered ancestor. The eyes of cemí images are particularly detailed and embellished, frequently with gold foil. Cemí images did not just adorn objects. It was frequently recorded that Taínos wore cemí symbols as painted and/or tattooed personal adornments. Cemí symbols no doubt adorned many other objects for personal, ritual and general use that have not survived the passage of time.

Some of the trigonolitos and other cemí figures that have been recovered are small, simple, unadorned, while others are elaborately carved with human, animal or anthropomorphic features. Were the more elaborate cemíes considered to be more powerful? That is quite likely. Francisco José Arnaiz suggests that it was not only the artistry of the design that indicated a cemí's power, but that "its power was in relation to the type of material of which it was made" (141). Based on our own values, we might imagine that gold was the most precious, therefore the most powerful material from which to make or decorate cemíes, and the Taínos did use gold to embellish religious and ceremonial objects; however *guanín*, a copper-gold alloy that shines more brilliantly than gold and that was probably imported from the mainland (hence was more rare on Hispaniola than gold), was valued more highly by the Taínos.

Also, cotton cloth, brilliantly colored feathers, rare colored stones (especially green), and marble (which was said to be "of the feminine sex") were highly valued materials among the Taínos. Even "lowly" materials were used, however, in the making of cemies, for material value was not the only determinant. Martyr wrote:

Some are made of wood, because it is amongst the trees  
and in the darkness of night they have received the message  
of the gods. Others, who have heard the voice amongst the  
rocks, make their cemies of stone; while others, who heard  
the revelation while they were cultivating their ages--that kind  
of cereal I have already mentioned--make theirs of roots.

(Vol. 1, 173)

Each of the nitaínos had his or her own personal cemies, perhaps as many as ten or more. It is not known whether naborías had cemies, or only nitaínos. Cemies--and their powers—could be passed down to successors, given as gifts, traded, or even stolen or acquired as war trophies. Caciques and other nitaínos boasted about their cemies, bragging that theirs were more glorious than the cemies of others. The entire village or cacicazgo paid tribute to the cacique's cemies, which protected and helped all the people. It is unclear, however, whether a high-ranking cacique became paramount because of the power of his cemies or if his cemies were considered powerful because he was a

high-ranking, successful cacique--perhaps it was a combination of both.

It was probably the most powerful of a cacique's *cemies* whose miniature image he wore on a pendant tied with string on his forehead. Archaeologists have found small figurines with holes for suspending them from a cord that may have been used for this purpose, but no other scholars have connected them to the Taínos' ritual greeting of touching one another's foreheads. Perhaps the ritual greeting was a way of paying obeisance to one another's "spiritual double."

#### Other religious art

Sued-Badillo has suggested that the caciques took advantage of the captive artisanry of their multiple wives to enhance the quantity and beauty of their possessions, hence also to enhance their power. These beautiful objects with spiritual power included all manner of practical things, from food and beverage containers to hammocks and canoes, as well as a wide array of ceremonial and religious items, such as figurines and *trigonolitos*, large sculptures for placement on what the Spaniards described as altars, effigy vases, *dujos*, vomiting spatulas, inhalers, and elaborate feather-and-gold headdresses, belts, capes, masks, collars and bracelets. All were decorated with the symbolic representations of *cemies*, for *cemies* "had power, gave power and reflected power" (Arnaiz 141).

One of the most prized possessions of the caciques was the *dujo*, a type of short-legged stool or chair. *Dujos* were skillfully carved (probably by the cacique's wives) out of a single piece of *lignum vitae* or *caoba* that was then

polished to a high gloss. Most dujos took the four-legged shape of anthropomorphic beings. Oviedo says this was "to signify that the one seated there is not alone, but [with] his adversary"--his cemí (Book 61, Chp. 1). The caciques also sat on dujos to elevate themselves above all the rest of their people, who sat on mats on the ground—caciques were even buried sitting on their dujos. Sebastián Robiou Lamarche suggests yet another reason the caciques valued dujos. The traditional sling-back, low-profile shape of the dujo was designed "to facilitate" the cacique's important function as an "interpreter" of the cemies' messages when he was in a cohoba-induced trance (63).

No doubt personal items, as well as domestic and practical objects owned by the other nitaínos, and perhaps even the naborías, were embellished with symbols of the cemies to remind the people of their reliance upon them for everything from daily health and subsistence to fruitful childbearing and the successful outcome of wars. Few items made of perishable materials have survived the passage of time, but both Martyr and Las Casas recorded that even the insides of the Taínos' huts were decorated with intricate designs woven in dyed straw, wood and bark. The profusion of cemí symbols was decorative and, simultaneously, was a constant reminder of the peoples' sacred obligations. Those obligations, of course, were not just to the cemies, who were other worldly spirits, but to the caciques and behiques because of their intimate connections to the most powerful of those spirits.

Fasting, purging and the cohoba ritual

One of the most written about of the Taíno spiritual rituals was the caciques' taking of cohoba, a drug that induced a trance state and hallucinations that facilitated the Taínos' communications with their cemies. (Behiques are also said to have taken cohoba, but their ritual may have been done in secret, for the chroniclers did not describe it.) The cacique, and sometimes the entire Taíno community, went on long ritual fasts as a sacrifice to the cemies before the cacique partook of the cohoba. Fasting is a nearly universal method for achieving a trance state and would have enhanced both the depth of the trance and speed with which it took effect. After the proscribed fasting period, and after a ritual community bath, probably with special flowers and herbs, the cacique (and sometimes the whole community along with him) purged his stomach using both herbs and a vomiting stick. Again, this would have enhanced both the depth and speed with which he entered a trance state. Then the community's women served him the cohoba--a finely ground dried powder that was probably a mixture of hallucinogenic drugs that included *Piptadenia peregrina*, *Anadenanthera peregrina* and tobacco. Las Casas described how the cohoba mixture was mounded in a "round bowl... made of wood, very handsome" (*Apologética*, Vol. 3, Chp. 166, 1152). The round wooden bowl that Las Casas described formed the headpiece of very elaborately carved statutes, no doubt representations of a cemi. The cacique inhaled the trance-inducing powder using a special tube shaped like the letter "Y" and made of bone, wood or fired clay—the tube was called a *tabaco*, a Taino word that was mistakenly attributed to the smoking/inhaling herb. Some of the inhalers were elaborately crafted, others

unadorned. Among those collected by archaeologists is one depicting a figure that is clearly male (remember that women did not partake of the cohoba, at least publically); its genitals would have been set into the cohoba mixture and the feet of its uplifted legs inserted in the user's nostrils. "Almost immediately" after inhaling the cohoba, wrote Martyr, "they believe they see the room turn upside down, and men walking with their heads downwards" (Vol. 1, 174). They would lose consciousness, wake slightly, act "drunk," and speak incoherently, "like Germans" It was in this state that caciques and behiques communicated with their cemies, learning "the secrets" of future events (Las Casas, *Apologética*, Vol. 3, Chp. 166, 1152-1153)..

Pané was the first of the Spaniards to record that "purging" was not only part of a religious rite among the Taíno, but a panacean method of healing as well. The many purgative "medicines" used by the Taínos and the proliferation of vomiting spatulas among their material remains--both unadorned and elaborately engraved--testify to the prominence of ritual fasting and purging among them. José Juan Arrom notes that the importance associated with vomiting makes sense "to a people who could die if they ingested bitter yucca without first extracting all of the poisonous juices." He suggests that ritual vomiting was a sacrifice of "total purification" aimed at appeasing "the fearsome cemí" who controlled the process of turning poisonous yucca into nourishing bread 113-114).

### Areitos

The areitos are another of the Taíno well known rituals, for nearly all of the chroniclers went to great lengths to describe the Taínos' fondness for these celebrations with songs and dances. There were different kinds of areitos that took place in the batey, a kind of central plaza. There were areitos to celebrate annual events such as solstices, first plantings and first harvests, and to celebrate special events such as the marriage of a cacique, the birth of an important nitaíno, the coming of age of an important female, a visit from a neighboring cacique, or victory over an enemy. Areitos may have been held for no other purpose than to entertain or appease the people of the cacicazgo, and/or to bond them more closely to each other and to their cacique. Areitos were also held to propitiate a particular cemí or for educational purposes, for it was through song that the Tainos transmitted their histories and legends.

The Taínos had no form of writing, so they kept their history alive in their art and in songs, both of which are proven mnemonic techniques. Martyr writes that the Taínos learned about their history and legendary heroes (which he calls a "mass of ridiculous beliefs") directly "from their ancestors... preserved from time immemorial in poems which only the sons of chiefs are allowed to learn" (Vol. 1, 172). He explains later that:

These poems are called arreytos. As with us the guitar player, so with them the drummers accompany these arreytos and lead singing choirs.... Some of the arreytos are

love songs, other are elegies, and others are war songs; and each is sung to an appropriate air. (Vol. 1, 361)

Many aspects of the areitos were ritualistic. For example, the participants (usually described as the entire village, but perhaps only the nitaínos) fasted, taking only "the juice of certain herbs," for six to seven days. Just before the areito began, they cleansed their bodies in the river using the same herbs (Las Casas, *Apologética*, Vol. 3, Chp. 167, 1155). The ritual bathing may have been obeisance to Atabeyra--in one of her multiple guises, the mother of Yúcahu was the "goddess" of the water. Then they painted their bodies "in divers colors with vegetable dyes" and, to complete the purification, they vomited together as a sacrifice to the cemies. Martyr describes this part of the ritual in vivid detail: "[T]hey thrust a stick, which each carries on feast days, down their throats to the epiglottis or even to the uvula, vomiting and vigorously cleansing the body" (Vol. 2, 316).

Next the cacique, seated on his dujo, partook of the cohoba and, hands on his knees in the ritual position, consulted the cemies. Afterwards, he revealed the prophecies to the people. From that point, each areito, depending upon its purpose (and whether the prophecy was favorable or not), followed a different sequence of celebration--but a focal point of each was a series of songs and dances in which participants alternated as leaders.

Drums were not the only instrumental accompaniment, as Martyr believed. The Taínos had a wide variety of instruments that included drums, *maracas*

(rattles—these were also sacred instruments that the behiques used for healing)), *güiros* (scrapers), flutes and other wind instruments. The rhythmic tinkling of strings of snail shells with which "both sexes weighted their arms, hips, calves, and heels," added to the beat. Martyr wrote that, "Loaded with these shells they struck the ground with their feet, dancing, leaping, respectfully saluting the cacique who [sat] at his door... beating on a drum with a stick" (Vol. 2, 316). As many as 300-400 dancers participated at a time, weaving around the batey "with their arms around each others shoulders" (Las Casas, Apologética, Vol. 3, Chp. 204, 1317).

The Taínos celebrated all that was good, beautiful and positive in the world with song and dance. Songs and dances were a way to thank the cemies for helping them to live happy and healthy on earth. Sacred songs were among the most valued of the prestige gifts exchanged among Taíno nobles. The exchange of songs created strong bonds of fictive kinship and reciprocal responsibility. Martyr noted this several times when explaining why one cacique or another would not turn traitor against another Indian or Spaniard, i.e., when he wrote about how the cacique Mayobanex defended Guarionex, who had taught him and his principal wife "to sing and dance, a thing not to be held in mediocre consideration" (Vol. 1, 146).

### Bateyes

Most of the Taíno rituals that we know about were officiated by the caciques, but the ballgame played in the batey was officiated by a behique. The

term "batey," like many of the Taínos' terms, encompassed two linked concepts: the multi-purpose ballgame that they played and the usually rectangular plaza where they played it and celebrated their areitos. (This suggests that the batey's use as a site for celebrating areitos was secondary, for its principle use appears to have been for the ballgame.) Many scholars, basing their hypotheses on knowledge of the ballgame among the Indian peoples of Mesoamerica, have suggested that the batey was a form of ritual warfare. Bateyes were probably played in lieu of battles and/or to bond together neighboring villages or cacicazgos, or groups of Taínos within a cacicazgo. Fernández Méndez suggests that "each game was an invocation to the gods" (18-19). The outcome of the game was considered to be divinely prophetic, which must have added a thrilling component both for the players and for the spectators who surrounded the court to cheer the game on--the caciques and their families sat in places of honor at the head of the playing field.

The game of batey was played in a manner similar to modern soccer, with two competing teams of twenty to thirty players each. The balls "were made of the roots of trees and herbs and juices and a mixture of [other] things... like a black pitch," wrote Oviedo (Book 7, Chp. 2)—it was the first time Europeans had encountered rubber. The players wore hoops about their hips and elbows, probably for protection as well as to send the ball back across the court at high velocity—many museums boast examples of circular stone "belts" and elbow rings, but these were most likely molds for the actual hoops worn by the players, which were probably made of rubber with straw and cotton woven around it.

Oviedo described how exciting it was to see the agility of the players as they leaped high in the air or dropped abruptly to the ground, and raced from one side to the other of the playing court, sending balls flying "as fast as the wind," trying to score goals for their team while preventing the opposing team from scoring (Oviedo Book 7, Chp. 2)..

The bateyes were fun sport, but were also sacred rituals. Standing stones, frequently with pictographs and petroglyphs of cemies, formed the boundary walls of the Taínos' bateyes, which appear to have been situated so as to be in alignment with the sun during the four solstices. Robiou Lamarche suggests that the batey's rectangular shape was symbolic of the four cardinal directions (46-47). The most important of the batey sites found so far (Caguana Ceremonial Indian Park in Puerto Rico, near Utuado) was located in a valley among high mountain peaks, near the source of a great river--the same kind of location celebrated in so many of the Taínos' sacred myths. The games of ball, then, may have served as vivid symbolic recreations of the great difficulties the original culture heroes went through in order to bring the gifts of earthly life--water, fire and yucca--to the Taínos.

The Taínos cherished life and their islands so much that they believed the spirits of the dead continued to live in the caves that are so abundant, walking about at night to enjoy any and all of the things that a living human being might want to do at night. The only way to tell an opia from a living Taíno was to check if he or she had a human bellybutton. The Classic Taínos' positive outlook on

death as well as on life is a reflection of the healthiness of their entire society and belief system. It was a society where everyone—male and female, young and old, alive and dead, humans and cemies—lived in reciprocal harmony.

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