

Caribbean STUDIES

Plant Fertilization by Magic in the Taino Area of the Greater Antilles

Author(s): Adolfo de Hostos

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Apr., 1965), pp. 3-5

Published by: [Institute of Caribbean Studies, UPR, Rio Piedras Campus](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25611862>

Accessed: 12/12/2011 14:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Institute of Caribbean Studies, UPR, Rio Piedras Campus is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Caribbean Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

I. ARTICLES

PLANT FERTILIZATION BY MAGIC IN THE TAINO AREA OF THE GREATER ANTILLES

*Adolfo de Hostos**

At the thime of Discovery the aborigines of the Greater Antilles had achieved remarkable progress in the art of tilling the soil. They were on the eve of discovering rational means for fertilizing the soil, having begun to apply urine to it. Yet they persisted in practicing some of their ancient and involved animistic concepts of sympathetic magic in their efforts to make their food-plants thrive. Ferdinand Columbus, Friar Ramón Pane, Pedro Martir de Anglería, Father Las Casas and the historian Oviedo have supplied us with the contemporary evidence in support of our belief.

As vehicles of their sympathetic magic ideology they employed certain charms, fetishes, idols and incantations pronounced by their medicine men. Some of these objects were perishable, others were made of rock. The *zemí*, an agricultural fetish or idol, has been, so far, recovered more abundantly than any other forms of this class. Moreover, it is, among similar objects, the one that readily lends itself to interpretation as a vehicle of magical concepts. It consists of a stone cut in the shape of a conoid, whose apex is one of the three points, characteristic of these objects, the other two points being the anterior and posterior ends of its base. It is evident that the apex attempts to figure some form of vegetable growth such as the stem buds of some food plants, particularly those of the *yautía* or tanier tuber from the Antilles. The *zemí* is then, the fetish or idol, that, according to Friar Pane, "has three points and they (the Indians) think they cause the *yuca* (manioc) to grow." This is well in keeping with the mainly utilitarian character of idol-cult in the Antilles. The existence of such a cult is inferred by the abundance of biomorphic carvings and incised ornaments carefully executed in the *zemí*.

The elaborate ornamentation was undoubtedly intended to propitiate the natural and the imaginary beings depicted. In other words, adulation of the beneficent spirits and animals by beautifying with bone, shell and gold inlays their representations or symbols was supposed to increase the idol's potency. It is known that *spirits* such as the Arawak animists peopled the world with, represented them with human-like features or composite beings possessing both human and

* The author is a distinguished anthropologist now in retirement.

animal form-elements. The carvings bear a relation to some natural factors affecting plant growth and fruition. Carvings depicting certain features of the frog and individuals of the aquatic avifauna, were supposed to have the virtue of attracting rain; heads and outlines of parts of the body of insectivorous reptiles appear frequently as protection of the garden plot from insect pests. A raincharm was found at Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, in the form of a full-bodied human-like idol showing numerous short lines proceeding from the forehead downwards to the mouth, resembling rain-drops. The great number of reptilian characters present suggest that several species of lizards helped the farmer to destroy the injurious insects. Modern laboratory methods for the examination of the stomach contents of small animals show that 92% of the food ingested by the ground lizard of Puerto Rico consists of numerous species of insects and worms that are injurious to plant life. The ground lizard and other species of lizards were listed by Oviedo as living at Hispaniola in the XVI Century.

Certain philological data gathered by the author seem to point to the possibility that the Taino farmer knew perfectly why he esteemed the lizard as his ally and why he feared the *butías* and the *yaguazas* as his enemies. It is possible that the knowledge of such relations may have originated a plant-cult in the Antilles, animistic in nature, homeopatho-magical in procedure and utilitarian in purpose.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARRET, O. W., "The Food Plants of Puerto Rico", *Journal of the Department of Agriculture of Puerto Rico*, Vol. IX, No. 2, Río Piedras, P.R., 1900.
- "The Changa, or Mole Cricket", *Bulletin of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Experiment Station*, No. 2, Washington, D.C., 1902.
- "The Yautias or Taniers of Porto Rico", *Bulletin of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Experiment Station*, No. 6, Washington, D.C. 1905.
- BOOY, Theodor de, "Certain Archaeological Investigations in Trinidad, British West Indies", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Lancaster, Pa., 1917, pp. 471-486.
- CORNILLIAC, J. J., "Anthropologie des Antilles" (compte rendu), *Congrès Inter'l. des Américanistes*, Vol. II, Nancy 1875, pp. 148-169.
- DEONNA, W., "Unité et Diversité", *Revue Archéologique*, Angers 1914.
- "L'Influence de la Technique sur l'Oeuvre d'Art", *Revue Archéologique*, II, Angers 1913.
- FEWKES, Jesse Walter, "Zemes from Santo Domingo", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 4, 1891, p. 167.
- "Pre-Columbian West Indian Amulets", *American Anthropologist*, N.S., Vol. 5, 1903.
- *A Prehistoric Island Culture Area of America*, Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, Vol. 34, Washington 1922.
- GRANT, Chapman, "The Large Ameivas of the Puerto Rico Region with One New Species", *The Journal of the Department of Agriculture of Puerto Rico*, Río Piedras, P.R., pp. 157 ff.
- HOSTOS, Adolfo de, *Anthropological Papers*, Based principally on Studies of the Prehistoric Archaeology and Ethnology of the Greater Antilles, San Juan, P.R., Government Printing Office, 1941, 211 pp.
- KRIEGER, Herbert W., *The Aborigines of the Ancient Island of Hispaniola*, Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1930, pp. 473-506.

- MARTIR ANGLERIA, Pedro, *Fuentes Históricas Sobre Colón y América* (Décadas oceánicas), 4 Vols., Madrid 1892.
- OVIDO Y VALDES, Gonzalo Fernández de, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra-Firme del Mar Océano*, Publicado en 4 tomos por la Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid 1852.
- STEJNEGER, Leonard, *The Herpetology of Porto Rico*, Washington, U.S. National Museum, 1904.
- WOLCOTT, G. M. and SEIN Jr., Francisco, *Entomología Puertorriqueña*, Estación Experimental Insular, Bol. No. 32, Río Piedras, P.R.