Rolling Back Extinction: Comment on "Curanderos at El Cachote"

By Jorge Estevez

New York City- I was happy to read the article, "Curanderos at El Cachote: Eloy Rodriguez and the Cloud Forest," in the August/2006 edition of ICT. The article focused on Indigenous medicinal plant practices in the Dominican Republic and the curanderos (healers) who practice this ancient knowledge.

The article had a strong impact in the Dominican Republic, where Taino-descendents welcomed it as a contribution to the founding of a national Taino cultural organization. Another blow has been delivered to the myth of Taino extinction in the Caribbean. Certainly, it will not be the last.

The Dominican Republic, also known by its native name of *Quisqueya*, has the dubious distinction of being the first Caribbean island colonized by the Spanish. It was also on this island that the myth of Taino Indian extinction began. The Taino people of the Caribbean, being the first native people to be called Indian, were also the first natives to lose that cultural/racial label by Spanish pens and promptly declared extinct. But for those who understand Native American customs and traditions, there is an obvious contradiction between academic statements about the Taino, our traditions and customs, and what can be visually witnessed in the mountain villages of the Dominican Republic and other islands of the Caribbean.

Extensive throughout the island, the use of native plants for medicinal purposes is common knowledge, for example the leaves of certain trees and plants such as *Tua-tua*, *Guanàbana*, *Copey*, *Anamù* and *Mama Juana* (a mixture of various plants), are just a few of the more than 50 (fifty) plants endemic to the islands used for healing. What is not well known however is that most of these plants and leaves can only be planted or gathered during certain lunar cycles or at specific times of the day. Special offerings must be made for each particular plant. This knowledge is possessed only by the curanderos who learn these practices at an early age. Usually passed down from father to son, or mother to daughter, special rules must be observed by the practitioners.

A curandero usually learns the plant's secrets from a family member who must pass on the knowledge to another family member before dying. Once a curandero has acquired the secrets of the plants, he will guard his knowledge until it is his turn to reveal their secrets. On the other hand, if a person learns from a non-family member then he/she has the task of having to teach three other people in his or her lifetime, thus insuring that the knowledge is not lost. However, three is the limit.

According to my mother, Luz Estevez, who is indigenous, the more one shares their knowledge with others, the weaker one's own medicine becomes. This, according to her, is why many curanderos guard their secrets from outsiders and will only reveal them at the end of their lives. She explains further, "knowing is like a deck of cards, the more you deal it out the less you have." This also applies to dreams and visions (*botijas*), if one has

a good dream, you must not share it so that it may grow, but if you have a nightmare or bad dream, it must be shared with as many people as possible, causing it to lose its power.

As the "Curanderos at El Cachote" article noted, sometimes people mistake curanderos for *brujos* (witches), curanderos will tell you there is a great difference. Curanderos take great pride in how they heal and unlike brujos, rarely accept monetary compensation for any service they may provide. Great pride comes from having a direct connection to the world around you and the ability to communicate with plants and in some cases animals. These curanderos feel that it is destructive for an individual to cause harm to others. As my mother eloquently puts it, “an Indian knows how to kill with one plant and can cure with two,” implying that, Indian people know all the possible uses and properties of the plants, but use them wisely.

After reading the Curanderos article, I forwarded a copy to some Taino friends in the Dominican Republic who were in the process of organizing the second annual International Day of Indigenous Peoples, celebrating the original peoples of the Western Hemisphere held on August 9, 2006. They were extremely happy that the article appeared in Indian Country Today. Dedicated to researching, investigating and documenting all forms of Taino Indian cultural survival and inspired by the article, which was promptly translated to Spanish, the group's event gathered 75 participants. That night, they formally founded a national cultural organization. They call themselves *Guabancex*, which in Taino spiritual beliefs means spirit of water and wind. *Guabancex* is also the mother of *Huracan* (Hurricane). Many of the members are scholars and teachers, and many are of Taino extraction.

I hope there will be more articles on this subject in *Indian Country Today* in the future. As a Native Taino from the Dominican Republic, I find it extremely interesting that most of our Native people share similar beliefs across the Western Hemisphere. Perhaps by understanding the way we all interact with the world around us, the way we similarly respect *Atabey* (mother earth) and the forces of nature, we can bridge the gap between the Indigenous people of North and South America.

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Pulled quotes:

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The Bat and the Guava:
Life and Death in the Taino Worldview

By Maria Poviones-Bishop

July 30th, 2001

1. Introduction

At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The white man will never be alone.(1)

As the first Native Americans encountered by Europeans in 1492, the Taino of the Caribbean vanished as a people more than a century before Chief Seattle's eloquent pronouncement. Yet his words could not have struck any closer to Taino beliefs concerning death for the Taino believed that the dead could take any number of shapes that made them indistinguishable from living people.

This research paper is an attempt to understand the Taino view of death in what scholar Sam Gill would call "the terms by which the people themselves understand the character of reality."(2) That is, this paper explores the connections between life and death in the Taino religion and attempts to re-construct this important element of the Taino worldview from what is known about Taino religion and culture.

This paper presents a selection of historical, archeological, linguistic and ethnographic information collected about the Taino that directly or indirectly reflects Taino ideas about death and its relationship with life. Because the Taino did not differentiate between their religious beliefs and the way they organized their society, it becomes necessary to cast a wide net across several different areas of Taino life in order to get a fuller picture of their sense of what death was about. To separate themes examined based on whether modern readers consider them "religious" versus "social" is an artificial division imposed by the modern Euro-American academic paradigm. Thus the sections below are structured around themes but do not adhere to strict separations between themes, between aspects of Taino life, or for that matter, between academic disciplines.(3)

Following this introduction, section 2 of this paper is devoted to a brief explanation of the historical and geographical context of the Taino, as well as an overview of the sources and methods employed in this study. Section 3 is a discussion of explicit Taino beliefs about death while section 4 focuses on rituals and practices. References to death in Taino Mythology are presented in section 5 while section 6 examines how death is reflected in the Taino healing arts. Finally, a brief conclusion follows in section 7.

2. Historical Context

Taino Background

The Taino people were the first Native American group encountered by Columbus in 1492 and certainly the most populous group in the West Indies at the time. They inhabited the Bahamian Islands and all of the Greater Antilles (i.e., Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica).(4) While the earliest observers estimated Taino populations in the millions across the Caribbean, modern scholars estimate much lower numbers peaking at a maximum of 500,000 in Hispaniola and smaller numbers in Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Cuba and the Bahamas.(5)

The Taino were predominantly the descendants of the Saladoid people who moved into the Lesser Antilles and Puerto Rico from the Orinoco drainage and river systems of the northeast coast of South America around 500 to 250 B.C.E.(6) These Saladoid ancestors brought ceramics and agriculture to the Caribbean as well as a religion based on zemies.(7)

By 1000 C.E., the distinct new group now known as Taino had moved into Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Cuba. Their population expanded considerably and they had developed "political systems in which many villages were united under the leadership of a single person or family."(8) This study focuses on these Tainos who flourished between 1000 C.E. and the arrival of Columbus in 1492.

Much has been written about the various groups of Taino: the more agriculturally advanced "Classic Tainos" of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, the more peaceful "Western Tainos" of the Bahamas, Cuba and Jamaica, and the more hostile "Eastern Tainos" of the Lesser Antilles.(9) Scholars have found differences among them in pottery, agricultural sophistication, linguistics, and inclination towards war. As the best sources available performed most of their observations in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, the "Classic Taino" are often the focus of research as they are in this paper. That said, some scholars are comfortable generalizing findings to other Taino groups "based on the Spanish assertion that all Tainos had similar cultural practices."(10) In areas where these types of generalizations are definitely not applicable, the sections below call attention to this.

As Gill observes, "Native American views of reality are not static structures."(11) The Taino were no exception to this. Just as in the case of other Indigenous groups, the Taino people were undergoing their own processes of change, development, and adaption during the period under study. If this type of variety and cultural vitality does not come through in this study, it is not because it was not there. Rather, it is more indicative of the difficulties in examining an entire community of ideas, beliefs, stories, and ways of living that no longer exist from the distance of centuries and not reducing them to mere shiny points on the historical horizon.

Sources and Methods

While there are accounts of autonomous Tainos living in Cuba as late as the end of the 17th century, Taino life (as lived in pre-conquest, self-governing communities) came to an end much earlier.(12) The significant time that has elapsed since then presents the

principal difficulty in researching Taino religion, and transforms what would otherwise be exclusively a question of ethnography or anthropology into research that relies primarily on historical and archaeological evidence.

The primary historical record of Taino myths and beliefs is Pané's An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians. Written in Spanish and completed around the end of 1498, this short manuscript is essentially Pané's notes on Taino religious culture, recorded over the course of several years living amongst the Taino people of Hispaniola.(13) Unfortunately, Pané's original manuscript and a complete Spanish language copy of it extracted by Fernando Colon disappeared centuries ago.(14) Not much was written about Taino religion until Yale scholar José Juan Arrom re-constructed Pané's text in 1974, using an Italian translation of Fernando Colon's biography and references to Pané in other Spanish and Latin works of the time.(15) Arrom drew from linguistics research in related Arawak languages to restore many of the original Taino terms and decipher their meanings.(16) This reconstruction of Pané's text is the primary source used by modern scholars of Taino religion today.

There are also several other texts by fifteenth century Europeans discussing their observations of Taino religious life.(17) One problem with all of these sources (including Pané) is the biased nature of the information they convey.(18) One strategy employed in this paper to lessen the effects of European biases is the use of examples and explanations of symbols from within the Taino context and/or the context of related Amerindian peoples. Another strategy is the discipline of separating descriptions and narratives from judgments based on values in these accounts.(19) The latter is easier to do with Pané, who under orders of Columbus to "discover and understand of the beliefs and idolatries of the Indians," presents possibly the most unbiased of these primary sources.(20)

Finally, there are several contemporary scholars who have validated many of the widely accepted theories about the Taino through archeology, linguistics and comparative mythology.(21) This study relies on the secondary sources generated by these modern scholars and the aforementioned strategies to distill as much Taino reality as possible from the Eurocentric accounts of the early observers.

3. Taino Beliefs About Human Death

The Land of the Dead

The Taino told Pané that the dead went to a place called Coaybay.(22) The name Coaybay has been translated by Arrom as house and dwelling place of the dead or abode of the absent ones.(23) Coaybay was located on one side of an island called Soraya, which Martius translates as sunset and Arrom translates as "remote, inaccessible, unreal place."(24)

Regardless of which of the translations for Soraya is used, there is a line or boundary drawn around Coaybay by the characterization of it as located on one "side" of the island. It is possible that the language of "sides" was the way in which the Taino envisioned some level of separation between the world of the dead and the world of the living.

Further evidence of this separation is the reference to Maquetaurie Guayaba as the lord of Coaybay.(25) That is, Coaybay is portrayed as a separate place with a separate leader.

Characteristics of the Dead

The Taino believed that both the living and the dead had a spirit. For the dead, this spirit was called op'a.(26) The op'a were believed to hide away during the day and come out at night to eat guayaba (guava fruit). The op'a were known to attempt to seduce living people and op'a women were said to vanish into thin air when living men tried to put their arms around them.(27) In addition, the op'a came out at night to "celebrate and accompany the living."(28)

The op'a could transform themselves into many shapes. They could take the form of fruit or appear disguised as living relatives of the person to whom they appeared.(29) That is, the op'a could take any number of shapes that made them indistinguishable from living people.

Yet the Taino did convey to Pané some differences between the op'a and the spirits of the living or the goeiza. One significant distinction is found in the translation of the term goeiza as "our face, our countenance."(30) Arrom believes this was the way Tainos expressed the uniqueness and individuality of living spirits.(31) That is, the term goeiza may be expressing the Taino idea that the living had definite form while the dead (i.e., op'a) were mutable and changeable.

Furthermore, the Taino told Pané that there was one way to tell apart the op'a from the living and that was by looking for the person's navel. The Taino believed the dead have no navels.(32) This interest in navels is especially meaningful if one considers that the navel is the point at which newborns are attached to their mothers. In light of the matrilineal descent customs of the Taino,(33) the navel or physical link to the mother also determined a person's place in the community or society.

Thus op'a were spirits without faces and navels. They were spirits that lacked both a unique individual identity and a place within the Taino community derived from the mother's line of descent. As Alexander has observed, "the navel is the symbol of birth and of attachment of the body to its life."(34) Having no navel would imply that the op'a were not born to this life, not grounded in particular human experiences. This association of the op'a with freedom is further reinforced by the symbols of flight associated with the op'a discussed in the next section.

Symbols of the Dead

The Bat

The spirits of the dead, the op'a, were thought to come out at night and feed themselves on guayaba (guava fruit). As Stevens-Arroyo points out, nocturnal consumption of guayaba is primarily attributed to tropical bats, which spend their days hidden in caves.(35) This similarity, along with the frequency of bat motifs in Taino art, has led scholars to investigate possible associations between death and the symbol of the bat in Taino religious culture. As Garcia Arevalo has observed,

In many examples of Taino art, skull-like images alluding to death dramatically fuse with images of bats (Chiropterae) and owls (Strigidae), animals of nocturnal habits and sinister appearance that are associated with the opias ...(36)

Garcia Arevalo has also noted that some Taino bat figures feature a central hole that he interprets as symbolic of the lack of navels on the op'a.(37) All of this evidence has led Stevens-Arroyo to suggest that the Taino may have "believed the form opia assumed during the day was that of sleeping bats."(38) Both of these scholars identify bats and owls as symbols of the zemi Maquetaurie Guayaba (see section 3.1 above) and of the "realm of the dead."(39)

However, this conclusion is not unanimous among scholars of Taino culture. Petitjean Roget believes that bats in Taino art symbolize men and dryness in opposition to frog motifs that symbolize women and wetness.(40) While it is true that this hypothesis matches the tropical seasons, there is little archaeological, mythological, or historical evidence to support Roget's theory that these motifs were paired in such tandems. Thus it appears that the archeological evidence better supports the interpretation shared by Garcia Arevalo and Stevens-Arroyo. This interpretation also appears to fit better with the Taino myths discussed in section 5 below.

Finally, it is important to consider that bats are flying mammals. If the Taino did associate the bat with death, they chose a curious animal that both mimics humans in early life (i.e. bats nurse one offspring at a time) and demonstrates the distinctly non-human ability to rise up in flight. The latter is consistent with Taino notions of the op'a as beings that are not bound or tied to this life in the same way as the living goeiza.

The Owl

As already noted, Garcia Arevalo also believes that the owl was equally a symbol of death for the Taino. He bases this on the observation that "owl eyes outlined on many archaeological objects resemble the empty eye sockets on human skulls."(41) Arrom finds circumstantial support for this connection in Caribbean and South American folk tales still in circulation that perpetuate the belief that the call of an owl heralds the end of a human life.(42) However, the latter is not that easily traced to Taino or Amerindian religious culture because the same belief about owls is also found in European folklore.(43) Thus it is possible that the folk tales about owls and death that still circulate around Latin America came from the European colonizers and not the Native Americans.

Arrom also connects owls to death in Taino mythology by noting similarities between geometric designs found on stylized owl motifs and a skull-like head that he has identified as the lord of the dead, Maquetaurie Guayaba.(44) It is true that all of these figures have some form of geometric designs that might be related but the degree of correspondence on these is very difficult to judge from the photos available.(45) The evidence for the connection between owls and death in Taino religious culture is suggestive but inconclusive.

Contrasts Between Taino and European Beliefs About the Dead

In her structural analysis of Pané's manuscript, Lopez-Baralt has found that the chapters of Pané's work with the highest numbers of editorial comments, changes of voice, and evaluative statements are the two chapters related to Taino beliefs about the dead.(46) Lopez-Baralt goes on to speculate that this probably indicates the degree of discomfort that Pané felt with Taino notions of a joyous, happy afterlife for infidels or non-Christians.(47) Whether or not this was the case, Lopez-Baralt's finding indicates, at the very least, a change in Pané's handling of the Taino material.

This change may have been an expression of discomfort or it may have just been the natural reaction of a person trying to understand a radically different worldview than his own. As Arrom summarizes,

For the Taino, from what we have seen, death was not extinction, punishment or reward. It was an episode in the transition from one existence to the other, an event expected and anticipated in the natural cosmic order ... The dead were not in heaven or hell, or with the creator. They were on one side of the island, waiting for the sun to go down to come out and eat guayaba, have sex, celebrate and dance.(48)

The differences between Taino perceptions of death and European Christian ideas are also evident in the choice of many Taino to commit suicide instead of serve as slaves in the Spanish encomiendas.(49) Finally, this difference also explains Taino chief Hatuey's decision against converting to Christianity before his execution. While the narrative of Las Casas about this episode emphasizes that Hatuey chose hell over heaven in order to avoid seeing his Christian tormentors in the afterlife, it seems more likely that Hatuey saw the choice as one between the Christian afterlife and his people's Coaybay.(50)

4. Rituals & Practices

Rituals at the Beginning of Life

Very little is known about Taino traditions surrounding the birth of a child. A lesser known, secondary source from the 1920's writes that Taino births were marked by ceremony but there are no footnotes to indicate from which primary source this information was derived.(51) Without details about this aspect of Taino religious culture, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about how birth rituals might have expressed Taino concepts of life and death.

Rituals and Practices Related to Death

Taino Burials

Much of what is known about Taino burials comes from archeological data. There is archeological evidence that dead Tainos were buried in the ground or interred in caves.(52) Taino caves were often painted or decorated with images of spirits (i.e., petroglyphs) but scholars have not really found concrete connections between these images and Taino beliefs.(53)

Much of the recent archeological research has focused on the burial practices of the Saladoids or ancestors of the Taino. For example, archaeologists have found that the

Saladoid buried their skeletons facing East, towards the rising sun.(54) One reason the Saladoid sites have been more widely studied is that the Saladoid sites are much bigger. The Saladoids buried their dead communally, in central, public spaces such as ball courts and areas where community dances were held.(55) In contrast, the Taino of Puerto Rico, had begun to bury their dead individually in domestic areas, "either under the house floor or in associated trash middens."(56) Curet and Oliver feel that this shift is evidence of "the increasing preeminence attained by individual household units at the expense of larger kinship groups."(57)

Siegel interprets this shift as indicative of the shift in Taino ideology from an egalitarian ethic to a model of hierarchical domination.(58) The latter is consistent with archeological evidence that higher-ranking people in Taino society were buried with their prized possessions.(59)

In terms of historical data, there are multiple corroborating accounts of a high-ranking Taino cacique (chief) in Hispaniola who was buried with a living wife.(60) However, this type of consistency in the historical record is the exception rather than the rule. Examined together, "the brief descriptions provided by the chroniclers are somewhat confusing, incomplete, and in some cases contradictory."(61) Thus most scholars subscribe to the conclusion that the mortuary practices of the Taino differed from island to island.(62)

The aforementioned problems limit any scholar's ability to completely examine all of the mortuary practices associated with the Taino. However, two of these practices that appear to be more closely related to Taino concepts of life and death are examined in more detail in the two sections below.

Zemies from the Dead

When caciques were not buried after death, there is evidence to suggest that their bones were used as zemies and that the cacique's spirit came to be regarded as a zemi.(63) The bones, particularly the skull, were converted into zemies "by sewing a cotton figure over the skeletal framework, or they would be preserved in reliquary urns."(64)

Alternatively, they were converted into zemies by a process of drying. Christopher Columbus reported that some of the skulls of important ancestors were placed in baskets that he observed hanging from the roofs of the bigger houses within Taino communities.(65)

Regardless of how they were created, it appears that some zemies were believed to be direct ancestors or recently deceased.(66) As one chronicler quoted by Stevens-Arroyo wrote, "'they say that the spirit of the dead one speaks through these, and forewarns them of the designs of their enemies.' "(67) From this, it appears that the Taino associated some dead ancestors with superhuman powers and that is why these people were worshipped as zemies.

Finally, Deren claims that the Taino association of zemies with dead spirits moving around in the world of the living survives in modern times in the concept of the zombie in contemporary Haitian Voodoo.(68)

Endocannibalism

As Oliver describes it, the Taino practiced endocannibalism or "a ceremony during which the powerful spiritual essence of a deceased person is passed along to the living in a beverage made with his or her ground and burned bones, which all the participants drink."(69) Oliver adds that this practice continues today among Indians of South America who view bones as "the source of life itself."(70)

It is not clear what type of evidence Oliver uses to confirm that the Taino practiced ritual endocannibalism but even assuming this was the case, the practice would indicate that the Taino associated death with the regeneration of life. As Oliver uses Taino myths to confirm this belief, we now turn towards analyzing the mythological evidence.

5. Death in Taino Mythology

Opiyelguobiran, "Our Spirit of the Darkness"

The zemi or deity called **Opiyelguobiran** is introduced in Chapter XXII of Pané's manuscript as a four-legged creature "like a dog."(71) Arrom's analysis of his name teases out the words op'a (already defined as spirit of the dead) and guobirán, which is a combination of shorter words that in Arawak means "our spirit of the darkness."(72) The Taino told Pané that **Opiyelguobiran** had a tendency to escape into the jungle at night and they had tried to tie him up with a rope so that he would not leave but this did not work.(73) The Taino also told Pané that this zemi had disappeared again when the Christians arrived on Hispaniola. They had followed his tracks to the edge of a lagoon but they were unable to recover him and they never heard from him again.(74)

As **Opiyelguobiran** was described with canine language and he was associated with the spirits of the dead and the darkness, there have been parallels drawn between this zemi and the Greek Cerberus, the guardian dog of the underworld.(75) However, there is nothing in the historical record of Taino religion that suggests a belief that **Opiyelguobiran** guarded the entry to Coaybay.

Furthermore, **Opiyelguobiran** was not mentioned in connection with Maquetaurie Guayaba (lord of the dead) or Coaybay (dwelling place of the dead). Instead, the Taino told Pané that this spirit was in the possession or under the control of a cacique named Sabananiobabo.(76) The latter seems to represent a live cacique who Pané describes as a preeminent man with "many subjects under his command."(77) The name Sabananiobabo itself has been translated by Arrom as "savannah of the jobos," or savannah of the hog plum trees.(78)

Noting the prominence of hog plum trees in one of the Taino etiological myths (discussed below), Oliver contrasts the sourness of this fruit with the sweetness of the guava, already connected to the spirits of the dead. Oliver incorporates this into a Levi-Strauss inspired structural analysis that yields the conclusion that the Taino associated the world of the dead with sweetness, the world of the living with sourness, and the zemi **Opiyelguobiran** with the lagoon between these two worlds.(79) While this is an interesting application of structural theory, there is little support for such a model in Taino beliefs about the dead as described to Pané (see section 3 above).

That said, Oliver's work does contribute an interesting observation from the myth of **Opiyelguobiran**. This is the realization that the zemi **Opiyelguobiran**, associated with the spirits of the dead, was compared to a dog, the only domesticated animal the Taino possessed.(80) Perhaps this indicates that the Taino believed that dogs also had a spirit. This hypothesis is even more likely if Garcia Arevalo is correct in his hypothesis that "some animals were thought to be tribal ancestors, and their strong sense of kinship allowed them to partake, to some extent, of the human condition."(81)

The myth of the zemi **Opiyelguobiran** seems to raise more questions than answers. Because this zemi does not get mentioned at all in conjunction with the general beliefs about the dead reported by Pané in chapters XII and XIII of his manuscript (see Section 3 above), it is possible this zemi was a relatively new deity or a local, clan spirit whose story was not part of the common religious culture of larger Taino groupings. The latter would certainly be supported by the plural possessive "our" prefix found in **Opiyelguobiran's** name ("Our Spirit of Darkness").

Death and The Divine Midwife

Atabey (or Attabeira) was considered the central goddess figure of Taino religion. She was described as the mother of Yocahu, the god that lives in heaven and has no male ancestor.(82) At least two European chroniclers of the early 16th century indicate that this "mother of God" deity was honored in an important yearly festival.(83)

The zemies that Arrom associates with Atabey are all made from white bone or white shell that resembles bone.(84) These zemies are molded in the form of a woman giving birth. Arrom hypothesizes that these were the zemies that were invoked by Taino women for assistance with childbirth.(85) The construction of zemies to assist in childbirth from the remains of the dead (or from white shell that resembles bones) might indicate that the Taino perceived of death as a process closely related to the creation of new life.

There are other connections between the zemies used for childbirth and the healing of diseases that may shed some light on Taino ideas about death. The discussion of these is deferred to the section on shamanism below (section 6).

In conclusion, the apparent association of the goddess associated with childbirth with bones of the dead may be interpreted as evidence that the Taino understood the role of death in birth, fertility and the re-creation of life.

The Presence of Death in Taino Etiological Myths

The Creation of the Oceans

Chapters IX and X of Pané's document are devoted to the Taino myth that explains the creation of the oceans. In this myth, Yaya (or "supreme spirit") kills his son Yayael and places the bones in a gourd, which is hung on the roof over Yaya's house. Later, desiring to see his son, Yaya tells his wife (who is never named in the myth) that he wants to see Yayael and it is the wife who takes down the gourd and turns it over. At this point, the bones have become many large and small fish, which Yaya and his wife decide to eat.(86)

Thus ends the first part of this myth, where according to Oliver "the emptying of the gourd/uterus by the unnamed woman is a metaphor for birthing."(87) Whether or not this is the case, this part of the myth shows how the bones of the dead Yayael are treated the way Columbus described the Taino making zemies out of the bones of their ancestors (see section above). In addition, the dead bones of Yayael have become live fish in this myth fragment, and ultimately, these bones end up providing life-sustaining nourishment for Yayael's parents. Thus this part of the myth demonstrates Taino beliefs in the direct dependency of life on death.

In the second or alternative form of the myth,(88) Yaya goes to the fields and leaves the gourd with Yayael's bones hanging from the roof. Shortly after, four brothers arrive at Yaya's house. These four brothers are considered quadruplets, "all from one womb and identical."(89) The myth says they were taken out by a type of "caesarean section" from their dead mother, Itiba Cahubaba,(90) who died in the process of childbirth. The brothers begin to eat the fish in the gourd until they hear Yaya approaching. In haste, they try to hang the gourd back but are not able to secure it. The gourd falls to the earth where it breaks and lets out enough water and fish to create the earth's oceans.(91)

With the introduction of Itiba and her four sons, the myth now appears to utilize a combination of metaphors for expressing processes of creation: the birth of new life as childbirth (in the emptying of the gourd and in Itiba's labor yielding four sons) and new life arising from death (fish created from the bones of the dead Yayael and live children born from the dead Itiba Cahubaba). The complex inter-play of these two ideas supports the hypothesis that the Taino saw death as a pre-cursor to birth, fertility and the re-creation of life already discussed in the section on Atabey's zemies (see section above).

The Origin of the Taino People of Hispaniola

The Taino people of Hispaniola told Pané that they had originally emerged from the mountain cave called Cacibajagua ("Cave of the Jagua").(92) According to Pané's narrative, in the beginning all of the people were inside the dark cave. At night, various people came out, but as they were late returning to the cave at dawn, they were "captured" by the sun and transformed into various other forms. The man who served as watchman was turned into stone, some men that had gone fishing were turned into hog plum trees, and one man was turned into a bird that sings in the morning.(93)

As the spirit of the dead or op'a hid from the sunlight by only coming out at night, were known for their ability to change into flora and fauna, and were associated with guava eating bats who lived in caves, a number of scholars have made the connection between the op'a and the mythic ancestors of the Taino people of Hispaniola that dwelt in the Cave of the Jagua.(94) This connection presents a number of interesting possibilities with respect to Taino ideas about death.

For example, this association takes the hypothesis of the dependency of life on death a step further by allowing for the possibility that the Taino may have believed in some form of re-incarnation. A belief in re-incarnation would be consistent with Taino ideas that the living people were the ones with navels (i.e. signs of concrete human birth) and

faces (i.e. definite form and identity) while the op'a were those without faces or navels, or possibly those that had not been re-born yet.(95)

Given that these associations come from a myth that explains the emergence of the Taino people as a group, it appears that if they believed in some type of re-incarnation, it was not really focused on individual op'a.(96) Rather, the Taino may have been suggesting that it was possible for a large group of op'a to bring forth a new generation of people, plants, and animals through special processes of creation.

These special processes of creation bear close resemblance to human childbirth upon closer inspection. For example, the Cave of the Jagua as a representation of the collective womb is supported by the reference to the jagua, a fruit that produces black dye used by the Taino people to color their bodies.(97) The cave or cavity is in a mountain, which is not unlike the shape of a pregnant woman's belly. When one considers that newborn children come out of their mother's womb and belly covered in the darkest of blood, the image of the Taino people covered in jagua emerging from a cave located within a mountain may be viewed as a Taino expression of origin based on the language of birth from a woman's womb.

If the op'a or spirits of the dead were believed to take the form of cave-dwelling mammals (bats), perhaps this was the Taino way of expressing that these spirits were gestating in nature's womb until it was time for them to be born again and re-gain their navels. At birth, the op'a would gain not only navels but individual identities (or faces), which is also how the Taino characterized the spirits of the living or the goeiza.

Whether the re-birth paradigm fits or not, the strong connections established between the op'a or spirit of the dead and the mythic ancestors of the Taino people are difficult to dismiss. These connections argue for at least the conclusion that death and new life were inexorably linked in the Taino worldview.

6. Death and the Taino Shaman

Zemies from the Sick

The Taino shamans cured the sick by contacting powerful zemies through the use of cohoba powder, a strong hallucinogen made from the seeds of Anadenanthera peregrina or Piptadenia peregrina trees.(98) As Alegria notes, "often the shaman would produce a stone or an amulet and pretend to suck it from the patient's body, claiming that it had been the source of the illness and should thereafter be saved as a magical charm of protection."(99) That the same object that was thought to take health and vitality away from a person was also considered to be a powerful prophylactic suggests that the Taino may have viewed vitality and disease, or life and death, as two sides of the same coin.

Furthermore, Pané writes that these stone zemies taken out of the sick bodies were also believed to be "the best ones to make pregnant women give birth."(100) This application of zemies removed from the sick is supported by the writings of Benzoni, another European observer, who added that the women kept these zemies from the sick as sacred objects.(101) Regardless of who kept these objects, the fact that they were considered sources of good health and particularly useful in helping women give birth is another

indication that the Taino may have felt there was a strong interdependent relationship between the powers that gave new life and the powers that took life in the form of diseases.

The Shaman as a Figure of Mortality and Fecundity

Taino shamans used a number of instruments in their healing practice. These included stone pestles to prepare the cohoba, vomiting sticks used for ritual purification, vessels to store the cohoba, and forked tubes used to inhale the cohoba.(102) As Garcia Arevalo has observed, many of these objects are decorated with bat and owl motifs, probable symbols of death for the Taino.(103)

There are also effigy vessels and other Taino artifacts that represent images of Taino shamans. These are almost always "deathly figures" that are "emaciated to the point of skeletonization."(104) Yet as Roe points out, these figures typically possess fully erect phalluses.(105) Roe adds that this is just one of many examples from the "New World," where "the iconography of mortality was linked to images of fecundity."(106) In the context of this study, this is yet another example suggestive of the belief that the way to life and health went right through death.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined general Taino beliefs about death, mortuary practices, and death in relation to the Taino shaman and associated healing arts. In addition, references to death in Taino mythology and religion were also discussed. From all of these areas, the picture of death as inseparable from life emerges fairly clearly in many examples.

With respect to Taino beliefs about the dead, the close tie between life and death is reflected in their description of the spirits of the dead as nearly identical to the spirits of the living with two important distinctions. The spirits of the dead did not have navels and they seem to not have had faces. These two beliefs indicate that the spirits of the dead had no individual identity and no specific ties to clan and community. The spirits of the dead were simultaneously associated with the guava-eating tropical bats that spent their days inside caves and with the ability to transform into fruit.

In terms of Taino mortuary practices, there is great variety. Even so, the best documented practices, such as the construction of zemies from bones of the dead, exhibit a close inter-dependency between the powers that give life and the powers that take it away. A similar pattern emerges from the practices, instruments, and symbols associated with the Taino shaman.

Taino myths in general, and etiological myths in particular, are full of references to the important roles played by death and decay in the processes of creation at the cosmic and personal level. The latter is evident in the utilization of zemies, constructed from the bones of the dead or produced from healing the sick, as sacred objects that assist women in childbirth. In terms of Taino myths of origin, death is portrayed as a vital, necessary process that creates the oceans, the fish, and the original Taino shamans.(107)

As discussed in the section above entitled "The Origin of the Taino People of Hispaniola," the Taino myth about the origin of the people of Hispaniola has led scholars to hypothesize that the Taino associated the mythic ancestors that eventually emerged from the Cave of the Jagua with the spirits of the dead or the op'a. It is possible that this represents Taino ideas about the re-generation of life. Stevens-Arroyo believes these ideas might have easily developed from close observation of the Taino tropical environment. Using what the Taino told Pané about the spirits of the dead appearing as fruit, Stevens-Arroyo elaborates this hypothesis as follows:

When fruit falls to the ground, is it dying as it decays or is the seed inside beginning the process of gestation towards a new tree? The Tainos were surrounded by such paradoxes. Rapid decay in their tropic ecology was handmaiden to an equally rapid gestation. Such perceptions must have led to questions on the nature of life and death.(108)

From all of the evidence examined, it appears that the Taino did not see birth and death in linear, historical terms as two end-points of a life segment. At the very least, it may be said that the Taino connected death with re-birth so that the life and death aspects of their worldview were always connected in loops. Perhaps these loops are the concentric trapezoid shapes pictured on the back of zemies identified as Itiba Cahubaba, the dying mother of the four sons who created the ocean.

The Taino had not developed geometry as we know it, but they seem to have expressed something of a cosmic geometry in their concepts of life and death. Having no mathematical language with which to express cycles in time and recursive interactions between multi-dimensional forces, the Taino described their "road of life"(109) using Tropical fauna and flora. Thus the bat ate the guava fruit and then turned into a fruit.

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Notes

1 John Bartlett, Familiar Quotations (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1980), 456.

2 Sam D. Gill, Native American Religions: An Introduction (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1982), 25.

3 As Marija Gimbutas and other archaeologists have noted, it is impossible to study extinct religions and/or societies without the ability to patch information together from different academic disciplines.

4 The one exception was Cuba’s western tip (Pinar del Rio) that belonged to another group that was markedly less developed. See Irving Rouse, The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

5 Rouse, 7.

6 Samuel L. Wilson, "Introduction to the Study of the Indigenous People of the Caribbean," The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 5.

7 In this context, the word zemies refers to the carved stone or shell pieces that were worshipped as religious icons by both the Saladoid and Taino. Wilson, 5. More generally, the term zemies (singular zemi) was also used by the Taino to refer to spirits or deities. See Rouse, 13. That is, the Taino did not separate the icon from the

spirit it embodied.

8 Wilson, 6.

9 Rouse, 17-19.

10 William F. Keegan, "'No Man [or Woman] Is an Island': Elements of Taino Social Organization," The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 113.

11 Gill, 26.

12 Roberto Cassá, Los Indios de las Antillas (Madrid: Editorial MAPFRE, S.A., 1992), 297.

13 Ramón Pané, An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians, ed. José Juan Arrom, trans. Susan C. Griswold (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), xi.

14 Colon used the entire text of Pané's work in his biography of his father titled History of the Admiral don Cristopher Columbus by his son don Fernando. See Pané, xiv.

15 The Spanish language texts are Bartolome de las Casas' Apologetic History of the Indies and excerpts from the writings of Cristopher Columbus. The Latin text is Pietro Martire d'Anguiera's Decades of the New World. Ibid.

16 The version of Arrom's translation of Pané's text used in this study is the version published most recently in 1999 and translated into English by Susan C. Griswold as cited in footnote 13.

17 Bartolome de Las Casas, M. Girolamo Benzoni, and Christopher Columbus are among these.

18 That is, the information was recorded by pre-enlightenment, non-scholars writing even before anthropology was a discipline much less one based on the scientific method. "The intolerance and religious prejudice of these writers' era is evident in their distrust and lack of sympathy. And this bias means that even though their descriptions are extremely valuable documents, it is difficult to reconstruct a clear understanding of Taino religious beliefs from them alone." Miguel Rodríguez, "Religious Beliefs of the Saladoid People," The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 80.

19 In this sense, the elapsed time is an advantage because it gives modern scholars more distance from these early observers. As time passes, it lowers the probability that a modern scholar will suffer from the same bias and the same blindness to the bias as the European observer of the 15th century.

20 Pané, 3.

21 Arrom, Rouse, Stevens-Arroyo, Alegria, and García Arévalo among others.

22 Pané, 17-18.

23 José Juan Arrom, Mitología y Artes Prehispánicas de las Antillas (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1989), 53.

24 Pané, 18 (footnote 79).

25 Ibid., 18.

26 Ibid., 19.

27 Ibid., 18-19.

28 Ibid., 18.

29 Ibid., 18-19.

30 Ibid., 19 (footnote 86).

31 Arrom 1989, 55.

32 Pané, 18.

33 William F. Keegan and Morgan D. Maclachlan, "The Evolution of Avunculocal Chiefdoms: A Reconstruction of Taino Kinship and Politics" American Anthropologist v.91 (Sept. 1989), 618.

34 Hartley Burr Alexander, "Latin American," The Mythology of All Races, vol. XI (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 27.

35 Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo, Cave of the Jagua: The Mythological World of the Tainos (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 232.

36 Manuel A. Garcia Arevalo, "The Bat and the Owl: Nocturnal Images of Death," Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, eds. Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 114.

37 Ibid., 120.

38 Stevens-Arroyo, 232.

39 Ibid.

40 Henry Petitjean Roget, "Notes on Ancient Caribbean Art and Mythology," The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 105.

41 Garcia Arevalo, 120.

42 Arrom, 111.

43 Marija Gimbutas, The Language of the Goddess (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), 190.

44 Arrom, 110-111.

45 For example, the geometric designs on the figure identified as Maquetaurie Guayaba are found on a headband that is barely visible in the photographs in Arrom's book. See Arrom, figures 29 and 29a.

46 Mercedes Lopez-Baralt, El Mito Taino: Levi-Strauss en las Antillas (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1985), 77.

47 Ibid., 79.

48 This is closer to a translation than a re-statement of a passage in Arrom, 60.

49 Rouse, 158. The encomiendas were a "system of forced labor whereby entire Taino villages were assigned to Spaniards under the direction of their chiefs; they worked for six to eight months, then returned to their own homes and tended their crops for the rest of the year." Rouse, 178.

50 Bartolomé de Las Casas, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (London: Penguin, 1992), 28.

51 Alexander, 33.

52 Rouse, 14.

53 Ibid.

54 Rodriguez, 82.

55 L. Antonio Curet and Jose R. Oliver, "Mortuary Practices, Social Development, and Ideology in Precolumbian Puerto Rico" Latin American Antiquity v. 9:3 (1998), 226.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 233.

58 Peter E. Siegel, "Ancestor Worship and Cosmology among the Taino," Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, eds. Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 111.

59 Rouse, 13.

60 Curet and Oliver, 223.

61 Ibid., 224.

62 Ricardo E. Alegria, "An Introduction to Taino Culture and History," Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, eds. Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 23.

63 Stevens-Arroyo, 62.

64 Alegria, 23.

65 Arrom, 65.

66 Citing Las Casas, Arrom notes examples where these zemies were made of the bones of the direct parents of the people who worshipped them. Arrom, 65. Pané corroborates this custom. See Pané, 21.

67 Stevens-Arroyo, 98-99.

68 Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 1970), 70 and 282.

69 See José R. Oliver, "The Taino Cosmos," The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 149.

70 Ibid., 147-149.

71 Pané, 28.

72 Ibid., 28 (footnote 117).

73 Ibid., 28-29.

74 Ibid., 29.

75 Arrom, 63.

76 Pané, 28.

77 Ibid..

78 Ibid., 28 (footnote 118).

79 Jose R. Oliver, El Centro Ceremonial de Caguana, Puerto Rico (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1998), 137.

80 Ibid., 134.

81 Garcia Arevalo, 112.

82 From Pané, 3-4. While the "heavenly" language used to describe Yocahu by Pané sounds questionably Christian, the general consensus from Taino scholars is that there did exist a central, male high god in Taino mythology.

83 Joseph Campbell, Historical Atlas of World Mythology, v.2. The Way of the Seeded Earth, pt. 3. Mythologies of the primitive planters: the Middle and Southern Americas (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 318.

84 Arrom, 36.

85 Pané, 59.

86 Ibid., 13.

87 Oliver, "The Taino Cosmos," 147.

88 Stevens-Arroyo believes there are two distinct creation myths here and makes the parallel to the two creation stories early in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. See Stevens-Arroyo, 87.

89 Pané, 13-14.

90 Arrom's closest translation of Itiba's name suggests she is the bloody old one, "weighed down with years." Arrom also identifies Itiba as an earth mother figure, similar to Pachamama and Coatlicue for the Aymara and the Aztecs. See Arrom's extensive explanation of this in Pané, 13-14 (footnote 56).

91 Ibid., 14.

92 Ibid., 5 (footnote 10).

93 Ibid., 5-7.

94 For example, see Garcia Arevalo, 115.

95 See section 3 above for a discussion of Taino beliefs about the opía and their lack of navels.

96 While an emphasis on the individual is suggested by the individualized burials that the Taino had begun to practice (see section above), the myth may have developed during the Saladoid days when the people had been buried communally in central, public sites.

97 Stevens-Arroyo, 41.

98 Alegria, 24.

99 Ibid., 24-29.

100 Pané, 26.

101 M. Girolamo Benzoni, La Historia del Mundo Nuevo, trans. Marisa Vannini de Gerulewicz (Caracas, Venezuela: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1987), 99.

102 Rouse, 14 and Garcia Arevalo, 122.

103 Garcia Arevalo, 112-123.

104 Peter G. Roe, "Just Wasting Away: Taino Shamanism and Concepts of Fertility," Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, eds. Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor (New York: The Monacelli

Press, 1997), 132

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., 132-133.

107 In a later part of the myth described in the section above, the four brothers (sons of Itiba Cahubaba) inadvertently discover the practices of the Taino shaman much the same way they helped create the oceans. See Pané, 15-16.

108 Stevens-Arroyo, 246.

109 Sam Gill defines this concept as follows: "The cycle of human life, the journey from birth to death, is brought into line with cosmology by being depicted as a process of movement within the landscape. Life is a road one travels." Gill, 83.