

TRADITION OF THE MALE HARSH MENSTRUATION SPIRIT

Mythology of the Indigenous Nations of the South American Rainforest that may have influenced ancient Taino sacred Creation Narrative

There seems to be a recurring mythological theme among the agricultural Indigenous nations of the Orinoco river region, as well as other areas of the South American Rainforest, which features a divine Mother Spirit, sometimes pregnant with humanity, who manifests herself as a great constrictor snake, and who is closely associated with bodies of water such as ponds, lakes, and rivers, and at times with the Milky Way Galaxy.

It also features a male spirit, associated with monthly cycles or with the moon itself, who somehow causes this maternal entity or some similar divine female to develop menstrual cramps in a manner which is perceived not to be beneficial or entirely positive, in other words, not identified with the creative, generative lunar menstrual cycle of fertility, but instead with some symptom of sickness or ill health.

In at least one case of South American mythological tradition, this relationship between the male spiritual causer of harsh menstruation and the Divine Female almost kills her. In another instance, it threatens to abort primordial fetal humanity. This coincides with my personal position that this male spirit, Guakar, represented serious challenges to humans in the ancient Taino numinous thinking.

The male menstrual entity in some South American Rainforest mythological systems manifests himself as a brother of the Divine Female, and in other mythologies as the brother of the supreme male divinity, the Sun Spirit or Sun Father. I have always personally held that in ancient Taino mythology this other male solar deity is Yoka Hu the Spirit of the Yuca, and of Life, and of the Sun.

It would seem odd that so many agricultural native groups in South America, the seminal homeland of the matrilineal Tainos, would associate the moon and the monthly cycles that this heavenly body represents with a male spirit when the typical mythological association for the moon in most aboriginal cultures is usually female; and in fact I personally hold the opinion that the ancient Tainos did indeed maintain a tradition that included a female-identified lunar spirit called “Maroya” or “Marohu”. This is because I believe that the ancient Tainos differentiated between the true creative, positive, female menstrual cycle, and the more problematic reality which dictates that sometimes women do get sick and their bodies are out of balance, that in a case like that, there can be abnormal vaginal bleeding, or abnormal cramps, or even an unwanted spontaneous abortion accompanied by a great deal of hemorrhage. All of these things can and do happen in a traditional Native setting, and certainly happened in ancient Taino society. All of these physical phenomena appear to have been explained by the ancient Tainos and by their modern-day Arawak and Carib relatives in South America through a

mythological complex that represents the natural, positive, productive manifestations of menstruation in the image of a benevolent female deity, and the more troublesome manifestations of vaginal bleeding in the image of a mischievous male deity. That male deity is Guakar.

The problematic aspects of menstruation and abdominal cramping are personified in the image of Guakar. His name actually means “Our Harsh Menstrual Cramps” and we believe that he not only represented the discomfort and pain of illness in a woman’s body but, in fact, was, In ancient Taino tradition, an archetype for all suffering of any kind, experienced by woman or man. This expansion of a linguistic term which crosses the limitations of gender boundaries occurs as a result of a phenomenon that I believe is associated with the dominance of one gender above the other in the social framework of a community. Language appears to favor the gender which is socially dominant. Terminology based on the dominant gender can be used to include both genders. In ancient Taino parlance we can assume that discourse may have reached levels of ribald character similar to that in common usage among present-day natives of the Amazon rainforest. Among these people it is common to mention male and female genital organs and reproductive processes freely and openly without inhibition. I believe that the topic of troublesome menstruation may have been used within this context to represent a generic problematic situation. This phenomenon is, in a way, reminiscent of contemporary Spanish-speaking Caribbean vulgar parlance, in which it is not uncommon to hear a woman say “*Tu me tienes un huevo hinchao!*” (“You are giving me big balls!” or “You are busting my balls!”) The obvious conclusion is, of course, that women don’t have balls, and the metaphor is understood to be just that, a metaphor. It has absolutely nothing to do with real male genitalia or the supposed usurpation of these by the woman. But instead it simply means “You are giving me a hard time!”

In a society where males are dominant, such as the contemporary Spanish-speaking Caribbean you can hear a sentence such as “*El hombre solo a existido poco tiempo en la tierra*” (Man has existed for a brief period of time on Earth). In this expression it is understood that the word “hombre” (man) is not meant to exclude women. On the contrary, it assumes all people within the word “man”. In fact the supreme arrogance of this patriarchal mentality lies in the fact that terminology such as this is used as a catch-all for all humanity, both men AND women.

Guakar, in my opinion, is a manifestation of just such a linguistic play on words. Although his name reflects a bodily dysfunction which can only manifest in a female, it is, by extension, understood to generally represent distress that can affect both genders within the framework of a culture in which female terminology is dominant (because women have a very high social status). ¹ The specificity of the literal illness itself (vaginal bleeding and cramps) is irrelevant and comparable to the English term: “He is a real pain in the neck!” in which the speaker is not really talking about a literal “pain in the neck” illness, but instead is referring to a problematic person (in this case the specificity of an ailment called “pain in the neck” is irrelevant also because we are not really talking about an actual “pain” in an actual “neck”). Similarly Guakar, the archetypal menstrual cramp is not literally a menstrual cramp, but instead just any troublesome situation, any problem, and by

extension, an opportunity to learn. The image of a mythological being that originally was associated with the problem of a female physical illness is therefore used to represent all problems, generically, for all people (not just women).

I recognize two different spiritual entities that in one way or another, physically or symbolically, are associated with the shedding of intrauterine blood. One of these two entities is called “Maroya” or “Marohu”, the Moon Spirit, and we associate this female entity with healthy, creative, generative menstruation.

This cemi is mentioned by the monk Ramon Pane in his “RELACION DE LAS INDIAS” as being associated with a primordial cave called Iguanaboina, in a mythological region ruled by a being called Mautialtihuel, from which the moon (along with the sun) emerged in ancient times.² In present-day scholarly interpretation of the name of this spirit, the word has been rendered “Marohu” by some experts and has been associated with Dry Weather.³ The Cuban scholar, Jose Juan Arrom even goes as far as to dismiss the portion of the “Relacion” in which Pane refers to the moon’s emergence from this cave of Iguanaboina, in an effort to totally disassociate the Moon spirit from the word “Marohu”.⁴ This is pointed out by Joseph Campbell when he comments on Arrom’s writings:

“The name Mautialtihuel, however, means Son of the Dawn, or Lord of the Region of the Break of Day. ‘It would therefore,’ as Arrom remarks, ‘not have been the country of any actual, historical cacique...The reported cave in that country of that cacique, consequently, could not have been anywhere on the island of Hispaniola, but the cosmic opening through which the sun rises to illuminate the earth, and into which it descends and disappears, when from it the moon rises.’ Iguanaboina, according to Arrom, would not have been that cave, since the two stone zemis, Boinayel and Marohu, belonged to a very different story from that of the rising and setting of the spheres of the day and night.”⁵

In this passage, Arrom concludes that since the cave controlled by Mutialtihuel is the source of the rising and setting of the sun and moon, and since he personally holds that the cave Iguanaboina has more to do with weather and climate than with the sun and the moon, Pane may have made a mistake in associating the cave Iguanaboina with the cave from which the sun and the moon emerge. He is convinced that what he considers two different caves belong to two different mythological complexes and were confusedly wrapped up into one by Pane. Whereas The cave of Mutialtihuel is the birth-place of the sun and the moon, he feels that Iguanaboina is the dwelling place of two spirits that personify wet weather and dry weather in the form of Boinayel (wet) and Marohu (dry). He therefore does not believe that the name “Marohu” has anything to do with the moon.

I feel that this assumption on the part of Arrom, that Marohu and the Moon belong to two separate mythologies is a bit cavalier considering they are unequivocally mentioned in association with each other in Pane’s “Relacion”. Instead, I suggest that the name Marohu or Maroya is indeed associated with the Moon spirit and monthly cycles, and that if this cemi truly does represent dry weather, this meteorological association be perceived within the context of Maroya’s female lunar capacity to measure specific, regular periods of time (months) which can then be separated into dry and wet seasons.

Maroya was the Moon. The Moon was a female. The Moon marked the sacred 28-day cycle of creative birthing magic. Menstrual blood was sacred. It was the very essence of holiness itself as characterized by the ancient Mayas when they spoke of “chul’ el”, the sacred substance that resides mainly in blood. Blood was associated with the waters of the Earth. As a result of this the cycles of Maroya, the Moon, were seen as affecting the cycles of both the tides of the sea and the menstruation of women. That all said, we must nevertheless contend with the unavoidable fact that there is a duality evident in the perception of this lunar spirit within the mythology of the Arawaks. The Taino Maroya is indeed female, but she has a male manifestation. The Arawaks themselves tell us so. We can’t ignore that! This leads us to the other spiritual entity which I feel that the ancient Tainos would associate with menstruation.

The other spiritual entity that I believe the ancient Tainos associated with intrauterine bleeding is the male spirit called Guakar.

The translation of Ramon Pane’s RELACION DE LAS INDIAS which has survived to the present time is not the original Spanish-language version penned by the Catalan friar in 1498. That copy was lost. In the present era we are forced to work with a profoundly flawed Italian transcription created by a man called Francisco de Ulloa quite some time after the original was written. Contemporary scholars agree that this Ulloa version of Pane’s book leaves a lot to be desired, ⁶ and yet an interesting discrepancy in its interpretation pointed out by another early Spanish chronicler is glossed over by some modern experts, in a way that, again, appears to me a bit cavalier.

Ulloa translates a portion of Pane’s manuscript to say that one of the names of the ancient Taino Mother Spirit is “Yermaoguakar” or “Yermaoakar”. Because the text mentions that this spirit possesses five separate names, and in Ulloa’s transcription, Pane appears to mention only three others beside Yermaoguakar, some modern scholars have conveniently separated the name into two words; Yermao and Guakar (or Oakar) to complete the five names. By this logic, the word Guakar appears to be one of the Mother Spirit’s five titles and therefore by default Guakar is considered female. ⁷ This argument seems to be reinforced neatly by the etymological analysis of the word “Oakar” which means “Our Harsh Menstrual Cramps”. This phrase certainly implies a female bodily function. We could assume the case closed at this point were it not for the unexpected voice of that other Spanish chronicler, a man called Bartolome De Las Casas.

Las Casas lived in close contact with both the conquered Tainos of Hispaniola, and later with the unconquered Tainos of Cuba for a very long time. He came to know these people much more intimately than Pane could ever have during the brief period of time that he (Pane) spent living in the home of Cacique Guarionex writing his famous “Relacion”.

Las Casas disputes the assertion that the word “Guakar” refers to the Taino Mother Spirit. He contended that Guakar was really a male sibling of the Taino Spirit of Yuca and Life, the solar Spirit, Yoka Hu. ⁸ At first it would seem easy to dismiss the idea posed by Las Casas that Guakar is a male spirit, simply because we now know that his name is composed of words associated with a bodily dysfunction

that can only manifest in a woman. However the sheer overwhelming magnitude of South American Rainforest ethnological research supports Las Casas over the modern interpretation that some scholars give to Ulloa's imperfect transcription. This male interpretation of the nature of Guakar is reflected by Joseph Campbell when he states:

*"For the Water Mother is a well-known figure in a number of South American (Carib as well as Arawak) origin myths, and this Water Mother's brother, typically is the Moon. Guacar, which here is his name..."*⁹

All contemporary scholars (with very few exceptions) agree that Taino culture was spawned in the river valleys and plains of the Orinoco drainage region of South America. ¹⁰ When modern scholars analyze the name "Oakar"; Oa-Ka-Iri ("Oa" "Wa"=our "Ka"=forceful or harsh "Iri"=menstrual cramps) ¹¹, they admit that this analysis is based on the study of Arawakan languages of the Orinoco River. Otherwise we would not have the menstrual interpretation that is derived from that language. They admit that the culture and language of the Tainos is from that area. And yet some of them jump to the conclusion that Guakar (Oakar/Wakar) must be female because Ulloa's unscrupulous translation suggests that the word Guakar is one of the Mother Spirit's five names, and that menstruation is essentially female. They ignore a mountain of anthropological research done among the modern South American descendants of the ancient Taino's Arawak ancestors, descendants who are still living in the ancestral Orinoco homeland. They seem to ignore research that indicates that the spirit who causes troublesome menstruation in women is, in fact, male. In a sense these scholars (with the exception of people like Joseph Campbell) are listening to Ulloa, an Italian translator who, according to Arron himself, did a lousy job of translating Pane's work, and who has been dead for five centuries, and they are not listening to living Arawaks and Caribs who are dwelling in the ancestral South American country right now, and who are still telling the ancient legends that include male entities that can cause menstrual problems in their female counterparts.

I would like to introduce here a sample of South American Rainforest creation narrative material that supports my position:

The Arawaks and Waraus of Guyana tell a story of a primordial set of divine siblings, one male and the other female. The male sibling contrives to somehow crawl into the hammock of his sister at night when she can't recognize who he is. He commits the forbidden act of incest by making love to her. He does this over and over again, night after night.

One night, the young woman becomes curious as to the identity of her night-time lover. She contrives to smear her hands with the black juice of the genipe plant (quenepa in Puerto Rico, mamoncillo in Cuba). When her brother embraces her, she caresses his face with hands smeared in the black substance. The next morning the tell-tale dark stains on the boy's face reveal that he is the culprit and she is shocked. She berates him loudly, humiliating him in front of the primordial community people. Later she tells everybody she knows about his terrible breach of ethics. The boy runs away from the community, mortified, and rising up into the sky, becomes the Moon. You can still see the dark stains from the genipe juice on the face of the full moon. The negative energy raised by this awful transgression causes

the girl to bleed and get terrible cramps. In essence, the male Moon Spirit has caused his sister, the Divine Female, to develop harsh menstrual cramps. In another version of the story from another Arawak tribe called “How the Moon got its dirty face”, collected by the ethnographer Walter E. Roth, the girl uses the black soot from the bottom of a pepper-pot to smear the face of the Moon boy. ¹²

The Desana of Colombia, near the Venezuelan, Brazilian border have their own version of the Moon Spirit story. In Desana mythology this manifestation of the Moon Spirit is also male, but it is a bit more comparable with our my personal interpretation of Guakar in that it is not always harsh, it is not always negative. This entity is credited with beneficial powers which aid in the growth of plants and the gestation of pregnant women. ¹³ This positive aspect coincides more with my interpretation of Maroya the benevolent moon spirit. The traditions of the Desana were recorded by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in 1971, and he readily mentioned many of these positive characteristics of the Moon spirit.

On the other hand, when the Desana Lunar Spirit of Menstruation does manifest itself in a more problematic fashion, it is illustrated in a narrative concerning the Sun Father’s young bride. In this story the Spirit of Menstruation becomes jealous of the Sun Father, who happens to be his twin brother. This parallels my personal assertion that Guakar, the Spirit of Harsh Menstrual Cramps and Yoka Hu, the Spirit of the sun and of the yuca plant, are twin brothers. It also matches Las Casas’ assertion that Guakar is the brother of Yoka Hu. In the narration, the Sun Spirit has a beautiful bride who is extremely young, (she is destined to mature later and be the bringer of the life-skills that are important to Desana women). The Spirit of Harsh Menstruation wants her for himself and attempts to seduce her. His advances are evidently so forceful that they cause the young woman to bleed vaginally. This is explained by the Desana as the cause of all female vaginal bleeding (presumably the bleeding caused by illness or intra-uterine dysfunction since normal menstruation ought not to have been caused by an illicit act). In fact, having made love to the Lunar Spirit in his troublesome manifestation, made this young female entity so ill that she almost died. The Desana associate this female entity with the Wainambi Rapids in South America, and that is where she lay dying on a rock near the river, until her husband the Sun Father healed her by chanting and puffing tobacco smoke.

The Sun Father was so angry with his twin brother that he took away some of his brightness and that’s why the Moon is not as bright as the Sun. The girl’s vaginal blood, which the lunar spirit caused to flow, stained his face, and that’s why the Moon has dark spots on it. ¹⁴

It is important to note in this myth that the solar spirit (whom we already mentioned is associated with Yoka Hu) is the mate of a divine woman associated with a river rapid. In my interpretation this woman would be identified with Ata Bey the Cosmic Mother Spirit, who we have already explained, is a spirit of the waters. I contend that the moment of original Cosmic Birth was the result of the sacred conjugal act between Yoka Hu and Ata Bey, joining the male forces of the cosmos with the female forces of the cosmos to produce Creation. Here we have a perfect parallel between Desana mythology and my interpretation of ancient Taino tradition: The Sun Father (Yoka Hu) and the Spirit of Menstruation (Guakar) are

twin brothers. The bride of the Sun Spirit is the Water Mother or Earth Mother (Ata Bey). The Spirit of Menstruation causes a form of bleeding and cramps in the Water Mother (and by extension in all women) that makes her very ill (Gua-Ka-Iri “Our Harsh Menstrual Cramps”). I feel that these parallels are irrefutable.

The Desana mention another spiritual entity that can easily be associated with the Divine Female. This entity is a huge living Snake-Canoe. This canoe is crafted by the Creation Spirit in the seminal froth of the fertile Milky Way Galaxy and is used to transport embryonic humanity to the earth-plane along the rivers of South America. At one point the Canoe hits a rock and is capsized, scattering the tribal people across the tropical forests where they now live. It is interesting to note that the interior of the canoe where the embryonic people ride, is red in color, reflecting the color of intra-uterine blood, and in fact the name that the Desana give to this primordial canoe is “Fermentation Placenta”, a reference to the womb of the Snake-Woman, the Water Mother or Earth Mother. ¹⁵ In effect, as is the case in my own interpretation of Taino mythology, the Desana perceive humanity as having emerged from the womb-like interior of a female water snake. I will make further references to this relationship between the ancient Taino Earth-Water Mother and the image of a sacred serpent in the next segment. I will also present the writings of Eugenio Fernandez Mendez as the originator of this theory.

In the above cited stories, the Divine Woman’s abnormal bleeding is caused by the illicit sexual advances of the Spirit of Harsh Menstruation. In other stories of South American Rainforest people, the identification of Guakar, as both a spirit of abnormal menstruation, and a spirit of trials and tribulations, is split between two different but similar personalities, and evidently these personalities are not really that interested in the sexual favors of the Divine Female, but are simply just brutal tricksters who cause humankind, as well as the Divine Mother, all kinds of hardship.

The Makiritare people, a Carib tribe of the upper Orinoco area, give the story of the Divine Female’s vaginal bleeding a unique twist. In their narration the male Moon Spirit is not seeking sex with his sister. His intentions are quite a bit more sinister. The part of the story where this interplay between the male Moon Spirit and his sister emerges is well into the central portion of the general Deasana narration, which is called “Watunna”, and it is important to relate what develops in the story before that sibling interplay occurs.

In the Makiritare story (collected by a French ethnographer called Marc de Civrieux during a period of years from 1940 to the early 1960’s) ¹⁶ the Supreme Creator Spirit, Wanadi, crafts a beautiful alabaster-like egg by sheer shamanic power. Inside the egg is a host of embryonic humanity, unborn, but dwelling in there, within some kind of miniaturized context of organized tribal community, singing tribal songs, playing drums, dancing, etc. The egg is called Huehanna.

Wanadi manifests himself as a physical incarnation called Seruhe Sanadi. Although Seruhe Sanadi is a manifestation of the Divine Creator, Wanadi, he is, nevertheless, independent of the original Creator spirit and acts as a separate, human-like person. It is obvious in the narration of the story that Seruhe Sanadi is physically “born” into existence, but the version collected by Civrieux does not

initially specify who Seruhe Sanadi's mother is. It is obvious that he is physically born from some sort of divine female because the narration does mention an umbilical cord and a placenta. Where there is an umbilical cord and a placenta there has to be a womb, and where there is a womb there must be a mother.

In this version of the story we are not told what happened to this unmentioned mother, but we ARE told what happened to the placenta. Seruhe Sanadi cut his own umbilical cord, as he was born, and buried the placenta. The placenta, this thing that at one time co-habited and shared womb-space with Seruhe Sanadi (like a kind of twin), rots in the earth. The rotten placenta transforms into an evil hairy male creature called Odosha. Odosha rises from beneath the ground, hatching from the womb of the Earth, literally as Seruhe Sanadi's evil twin, born of the same uterus, bent on undoing any good that Seruhe Sanadi may put his mind to. In this interpretation of traditional South American Rainforest mythology, Seruhe Sanadi, as the physical emanation of the highest Spirit of Life, Wanadi (and Wanadi also, for that matter) is the counterpart of the ancient Taino Yoka Hu. Odosha becomes one of the two manifestations of Guakar, The other manifestation will emerge later in the story in the form of the Makiritare Moon Spirit called Nuna. Again, this version of Guakar is much more malevolent than the spirit that I have identified in ancient Taino mythology. I identify Guakar as a tough trickster, but never the demonic incarnation of evil that Odosha is. In Taino mythology Guakar teaches through tough lessons. In Makiritare mythology Odosha appears determined to totally extinguish all human life on Earth.

As the account collected by Civrieux tells us;

“Seruhe Sanadi...shook his rattle, chanted, smoked, and through the power of his quartz crystals, created the Old People.”

These “Old People” are a primordial creation of humans, thought into existence by the Creator Spirit. It appears that the beautiful white egg, Huehanna, with its embryonic human cargo, may not be necessary, since humans now inhabited the Earth. But Odosha would not allow this. He was determined to defeat the newly-made people. He tricked the Old People to commit the first act of murder, and as a result of this crime all of them lost their humanity and were turned to animals. Seruhe Sanadi saw that his work had been undone and felt so defeated that he returned to Heaven and became re-integrated with Wanadi. ¹⁷

The Old People, who were now turned into animals, were starving because food had not yet appeared on Earth. Wanadi took pity on the starving animals and sent them a second incarnation of himself called Nadeiumadi. Again, it is rather a mystery how this new incarnation of Wanadi was born. There is no mention of a placenta or an umbilical cord in this portion of the story, but later in the narration there is an unexpected mention of a mother for Nadeiumadi. I will address that issue in a bit, but now let's turn to the matter of the animal's hunger.

Nadeiumadi came to the conclusion that the only way to save the starving animals was by making a second attempt at creating humanity, whose presence on Earth might somehow alleviate the hunger of the Old People, who now existed in the form of animals.

This time he brought the beautiful white egg, Huehanna, down to Earth and proposed to hatch it. You could still hear the embryonic people inside the egg, celebrating. This is where the legend mentions Nadeiumadi's mother, because, as it

turns out, he needs her maternal energy to hatch the egg. The way the story is told, this mysterious mother needs to be brought to life in order to aid in the hatching of the Huehanna egg. The Narration tells us:

“Nadeiumadi...with his head in hands, sitting, smoking, thinking...shook his rattle, sang and dreamed that a woman was born: Kumairiawa, his mother”

If Nadeiumadi needed to magically birth his own mother then the implication is that at this point she is not alive. This means that she must have died at some point previously (a fact that is not mentioned in this version of the legend) and therefore, must be re-birthing. My intuition suggests that, like Itaba Cahubaba (the primordial mother of Deminan and his brothers in Taino mythology) Kumairiawa may have died giving birth to Nedeiumadi. For that matter, it is entirely possible that every incarnation of Wanadi, including the previous one, Seruhe Sanadi, may have been lethal to their divine mothers at birth and that is why there is little mention of these women in the story. If Nedeiumadi's mother is, in fact, a counterpart of the Taino Itaba Cahubaba, then, like Itaba Cahubaba, she was one of the many manifestations of the Great Earth Mother, the Divine Water Woman, the Maternal Snake. She must be the Cosmic Matriarch that the ancient Taino called “Ata Bey”. This intuition is borne out later when Nedeiumadi almost succeeds in hatching the primordial egg with the help of the Mother Spirit, Kumairiawa.

Unfortunately the whole plan goes awry when Odosha recruits the assistance of a lizard to destroy the physical body of the Earth Mother. Odosha urinates into a gourd. His urine is a potent deadly acid. He hands the lethal thing to his lizard accomplice and orders him to fling it at the Earth Mother, Kumairiawa. Covered in the poisonous liquid, Kumairiawa's flesh is roasted right off her body and all that is left of her when Nadeiumadi approaches is a pile of smoking bones. All he could do was to gather his mother's remains and take them away. He tossed them into a magic lake where she comes back to life and dwells there for the rest of eternity. In this respect, her identity as the Great Female Water Divinity is again confirmed. It is interesting to note that one version of the Taino Cosmic Matriarch's names is “Atabeira”. The etymological analysis of the name Atabeira renders the two terms “Itaba” meaning lake, and “Era” meaning water.¹⁸ Upon the mention of the word “Itaba”, the name of Deminan's mother (Itaba Cahubaba) again comes to mind. One can see the relationship between all of these various versions of the same female deity.

At the conclusion of this disappointing adventure Nadeiumadi again gives up and, after hiding the primordial Huehanna egg in Mount Narunna, returns to heaven.¹⁹

Wanadi again used his quartz crystals to bring forth a third incarnation of himself. This new version of Wanadi was called “Attawanadi”. After being born (again from a mother not mentioned in the version of the myth given to us by Civrieux) this character also spends a considerable amount of effort attempting to quench the consuming hunger of the Animal People, with very discouraging results because of Odosha's constant meddling. Eventually, with a great deal of trouble, with the assistance of a number of magical animal spirits and of other supernatural beings, Attawanadi finally succeeds in helping the animals acquire yuca and cassava. Finally they are able to stave off starvation.²⁰

At this point Attawanadi decided to hatch the unborn humans out of the

primordial egg, Huehanna. Unfortunately he committed the indiscretion of telling his plan to Nuna, a male spirit associated with the Moon in Makiritare tradition, but whose identification is really more like Guakar, that of a troublesome harsh menstruation spirit. Nuna seems to pick up where Adosha leaves off, and, in my opinion, they are both actually closely related and should both be associated with our concept of Guakar, a spirit of harsh trials.

Nuna actually happens to be a cannibal, and upon hearing what Attawanadi tells him about the Huehanna egg, he becomes obsessed with a desire to eat the people inside it. As the story progresses, Nuna tricks the spirit guardians of the Huehanna egg to hand the beautiful thing over to him by pretending to be Attawanadi. He rushed away with the precious prize and took it home. When he got home, his sister Frimene asked him what it was that he had stolen. However, she did not need to be told. She saw the egg and realized immediately that it was full of unborn humans. The Makiritare narrative collected by Civrieux tells us her thoughts; “I’ll hatch them and be their mother”. When Nuna left the house she snatched it and “hid the beautiful egg-shaped thing in her vagina”.

Later Nuna returned and began to look all over the house for the Huehanna egg, but could not find it. Frimene, by hiding the egg in her body had transformed herself into the Cosmic Mother. She had saved the egg from this present manifestation of Guakar, the Lunar Spirit, Nuna. She was in the position to succeed where the previous incarnation of the Cosmic Mother, Kumairiawa, had failed. At this point she became identified with the Taino Ata Bey. She becomes the mother of the primordial egg. The following is how Joseph Campbell re-tells this part of the narration collected by Civrieux from his Makiritare informant:

“But he saw his sister’s stomach and knew what she had done. That night, lying in her hammock, listening happily to the songs and laughter, drums and horns of the unborn people in her stomach, Frimene heard approaching footsteps. Something fell into her hammock, and hands began feeling and searching all over her. She pressed her legs together. The hands tried to separate them, and at dawn the presence had left. ‘What was that?’ she thought. ‘Was it Odosha? Nuna? Wanadi, looking for his children? Was it a dream?’ Next night she covered her face and body with the black caruta oil that our women use for their body paint, and when again those steps approached and something fell into her hammock, one of the hands, feeling, forced its way between her thighs, reached into the cave, and touched and tried to grasp Huehanna. She began to bleed (which is why our women bleed when the moon passes), and again, when day dawned, she was alone. Going out, she met her brother in a field. His face and body were stained black. ‘I’ve found him out!’ she thought, and fled. We can still see those stains on the moon’s face.”²¹

It is easy to see the comparison between this portion of the Makiritare legend and the Arawak story related above, “How the Moon got his dirty face”.

After this traumatic experience Frimene ran off and turned into a giant anaconda snake. She jumped into the Orinoco River and there she remained.

In the words of this contemporary Makiritare storyteller of the 1960’s it is pretty obvious that there is a close relationship between Nuna, their Spirit of Troublesome Menstruation, and Guakar the Taino spirit whose name means “Our Harsh Menstrual Cramps”. Like the bride of the Sun Father in the Desana story, Frimene is given an illness that affects her menstruation, and this, as opposed to normal,

natural menstruation, is not good. It is a trial. It is a hardship. Also, like the bride of the Sun Father in the Desana story, she becomes associated with a river. It is important to note that Frimene turns into the archetypal snake. As she swims about in the Orinoco River she carries in her womb the egg-like embryonic humanity, just like the great Snake Canoe of the Desanas. This is a parallel with my own contention based on the work of Fernandez Mendez associating Ata Bey (the Taino Cosmic Mother) with a great boa constrictor that I identify with the Cuban snake known as “maja” (maha) (*Epicrates angulifer*) . In Art and Mythology of the Taino Indians of the Greater West Indies, Eugenio Fernandez Mendez speaks of the connection between the Taino Cosmic Female (whom he calls by one of her other names “Guabancex”) and the sacred serpent. ²³

Eventually, the maternal Makiritare Woman-Snake, perhaps knowing that the animal people can not live on yucca and cassava alone, offers herself up willingly as a sacrifice to the old People. She allows herself to be hunted by them. She dies covered with their arrows looking like a great porcupine. Her body remains on the banks of the Orinoco to be feasted on by the carnivores such as the jaguar, but her soul goes to dwell in the lake of eternal life just like Kumairiawa had done before her. ²² The assumption, of course, is that Frimene, like Kumairiawa, is just another manifestation of the Water Mother and that, like Kumairiawa, she will reside in a great body of water for eternity. As mentioned earlier, these Divine Water Mothers are associated with rivers, lakes, ponds and the sea. They are all the same person in the guise of many different manifestations. We are again reminded of the analysis of the word Atabeira; “Itaba”=lake “Era”=water.

The giant snake has led the animal hunters on a great chase down the Orinoco River until they finally killed her with their arrows. In the midst of the death throes of Frimene’s snake manifestation, her body turns belly-up in the water and the egg pops out of her womb. In a sense, she gives birth as she dies, just like the Taino Itaba Cahubaba. The Huehanna egg flies up and when it lands, it cracks on a rock. The contents of Huehanna scatter all over the place, in the form of fish-eggs, each of which holds the germinal life of a human being. This is reminiscent of the great Snake Canoe of the Desanas which crashes into a river rock and scatters the primordial Desanas all over the place. As these Makiritare fish-eggs are thrown in all directions some of them land in the river itself and they hatch into actual fish and other water animals. Since these fish-eggs were once human, the suggestion is that there is a con-substantial relationship between humans and the fish. This brings to mind the fact that when in the Taino Creation story, as told by Pane, the funerary gourd of Yaya-el falls, what pours out along with the sea is a lot of fish. Yaya-el’s human remains have turned into fish. ²⁴ I contend that the funerary gourd is a symbolic womb to which human remains are returned (representing the dead person’s return to the Cosmic Womb). There is, again, a perfect parallel here between the Taino story of the origin of fish and the Makiritare story of the origin of fish.

Not all of the fish-eggs hatch as fish in the Makiritare narrative. Two of them were found by the Toad Mother on the river bank. She took them home and used the warmth of her hearth to hatch them. They hatched into twin boys, born of the same womb, the womb of the dying snake Water Mother. There is a great deal of

similarity between these twins and the quadruplets of Taino mythology. First, they are a multiple birth from the womb of a dying mother (Itaba Cahubaba died when she gave birth to Deminan and his brothers. Kumairiawa, likewise, died as she gave birth to the eggs from which these twins are hatched). Then also, they are mischievous just like Deminan and his brothers. They get into a lot of trouble with the elders. Ultimately they acquire fire and food from reluctant elders who possess these things and are not willing to share them. This also reflects the Taino story of the quadruplet sons of Itaba Cahubaba. ²⁵

These primordial human hero twins and their adventures are very much in the pattern of the Taino primordial human hero quadruplets. Ultimately, there is an episode in the story of the twin sons of the dead Frimene, in which they purposely smash a magical gourd, and from it pours such a great quantity of water that it floods the whole earth. ²⁶ This, again, reflects the Taino legend with yet another re-enactment of the same gourd-smashing scene.

This is only a small sample of South American Rainforest mythology which reflects the connections between Taino narrative tradition and the narrative traditions of the many indigenous nations living in the ancient homeland. There are many, many more like these that confirm these repeating themes. In almost every one of them there is a male character or characters like Guakar, who is in some way associated with unusually strong menstrual cramping and bleeding, and who is in some way associated with the Moon.

References and citations:

- ¹ Samuel M. Wilson, *The Taino Social and Political Order: Contribution number 4 in the compendium "Taino, Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean"*, edited by Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor, with contributions by Ricardo Alegria, Jose Juan Arrom, Marco Biscone, Manuel Garcia Arevalo, Susan C. Griswold, Susana Torruella Leval, Shirley McGinnis, Joanna M. Ostapkowics, Jeffrey Quilter, Peter G. Roe, Peter E. Seigel, Dicey Taylor, Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, Jeffrey B. Walker, and Samuel M. Wilson (New York City: El Museo Del Barrio, The Monacelli Press, 1997) pp. 46 "Taino Society was matrilineal. Name and status were inherited from one's mother, and social standing was reckoned such that women might outrank men, even if men usually held political power. The Caciques and their families were at the top of the social hierarchy, and the mothers, sisters, and grandmothers held especially high status."
- ² Ramon Pane, *Relacion acerca de las antiguedades de los indios*, ed Jose Juan Arrom (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1977)
- ³ Jose Juan Arrom, *Mitologia y Artes Prehispanicas de las Antillas* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975), pp. 55-57
- ⁴ Arrom, op. cit. pp 55-56 citing Pane, chapter 11
- ⁵ Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology Vol. II: The Way of The Seeded Earth Part:3 Mythologies of the Primitive Planters: The Middle and Southern Americas* (New York: Perennial Library Harper & Row, 1989), p. 314
- ⁶ Jose Juan Arrom, Fray Ramon Pane, *autor del primer libro escrito en las Indias*
www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/fil/02104547/articulos/ALH18080110015A.PDF
- ⁷ Arrom, *Mitologia y Artes Prehispanicas de las Antillas* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975), p. 44, citing Pane, parrafo preliminar.
- ⁸ Bartolome De Las Casas, *Apologetica historia sumaria cuanto a las cualidades, disposicion, descripcion, cielo y suelo destas tierras, y condiciones naturales, politicas, republicas, manera de vivir e costumbres de las gentes destas Indias occidentales y meridionales, cuyo imperio soberano pertenece a los Reyes de Castilla*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman, 2 vols. (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Historicas, 1967). Completed by Las Casas in 1560 and first printed in full in Madrid in 1909. chapter 120
- ⁹ Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology Vol. II*, p. 314
- ¹⁰ Ricardo Alegria, *An Introduction to Taino Culture and History: Contribution number 2 in the compendium "Taino, Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean"*, pp. 21-22, commenting on Pane's report on Taino culture: "Even with these abbreviations, it is evident from his reports that the Taino inherited an ancient and complex religious tradition from South America. Many authors have noted the similarities between the Antillean mythology as recorded by Pane and that of the tropical regions of South America, especially with regards to the creation of humankind, the origin of women, the divine twins, and the myth of the great flood (Brinton 1868; Roe 1982a)"
- ¹¹ Arrom, op. cit., p 47
- ¹² Walter E. Roth, *An Inquiry into the Animism and Folk-Lore of the Guiana Indians*, 13th Annual Report of Bureau of American Ethnology, pp 103-386, Washington D.C., Chapter XII "How The Moon Got It's Dirty Face"
- ¹³ Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, p. 341

- 14 Abridged selections from Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) pp.28-29
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27 and 55-57
- 16 Selected abridged episodes from Marc de Civrieux, *Watunna: Mitología Makiritare* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, C.A., 1970), translated, with an introduction and glossary, by David M. Guss as *Wattuna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1980)
- 17 Guss, *Wattuna*, pp.21-22
- 18 Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, p. 314
- 19 Guss, *Wattuna*, p. 28
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 128-135
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53
- 23 Eugenio Fernandez Mendez, *Art and Mythology of the Taino Indians of the Greater West Indies* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones El Cemi 1993), pp.18, 26
- 24 Ramon Pane
- 25 Guss, *Wattuna*, pp. 55-61
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82

Miscellaneous end-notes

Jose Juan Arrom

On the topic of Pane's manuscript and its problematic translation

www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/flil/02104547/articulos/ALHI8080110015A.PDF

Pané entregó el manuscrito a Colón hacia 1498. Este lo llevó a España, y en España lo vieron y aprovecharon Pedro Mártir de Angleria y fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. Pasó luego a manos de su hijo Fernando, quien lo incluyó en la biografía de su padre. Y se publicó junto con dicha obra, en traducción italiana, en 1571. Después no ha vuelto a saberse más del manuscrito de Pané ni de los originales de Fernando.

Las extrañas circunstancias en que desaparecieron dichos documentos han hecho que los relatos recogidos por Pané se viesen envueltos en la espesa penumbra de cuestiones colombinas que parecían no tener fin. Para mayor mal, la traducción, muy defectuosa de por sí, circuló después en ediciones aún más estragadas y maltrechas. Y a tanto llegaron la incuria y el desdén en torno a la singular relación que hasta llegó a dudarse de su autenticidad.

Ha sido sólo en años recientes que se ha logrado restablecer el texto, descifrar su sentido y reintegrarle su verdadera importancia. Puesto que las vicisitudes que ocasionaron aquellos trastornos han sido expuestas en otro lugar ²baste aquí con afirmar que Fray Ramón cumplió a cabalidad el mandato del Almirante. La *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* amplía considerablemente un espacio mítico apenas vislumbrado por Colón. Constituye el único testimonio directo que nos queda de lo que creyeron y soñaron los antiguos moradores de las Antillas. Es el primer estudio etnográfico de una cultura amerindia. Y tenida en cuenta la fecha de composición, resulta el cuanto a su veracidad, la comparación de sus informes con los de otras mitologías indígenas posteriormente estudiadas han demostrado irrecusablemente que son fidedignos'. De oscuro e inconfiable acompañante de Colón, Pané ha pasado a ser el fundador de una tradición mitográfica que se extiende luego a todo el continente y llega hasta nuestros días.

El proceso de fijación del texto ha sido, desde luego, lento y fatigoso. Perdido el original en español, obligadamente hemos tenido que

recurrir a la traducción italiana. Y ésta, en verdad, deja mucho que desear. La causa principal de las fallas de la traducción es que el autor, Alfonso de Ulloa, la había dejado en forma de apresurado borrador al morir, en 1570, en una cárcel veneciana. En la versión publicada póstumamente quedaban oraciones por ajustar, faltaban palabras y hasta frases enteras, padecía de violentas italianizaciones de nombres de lugares, personas, seres míticos y aun de cosas. Y los términos indígenas, trasladados con gran descuido, a menudo habían perdido algunas letras o éstas habían sido leídas incorrectamente. En esos términos indígenas, sobre todo en los nombres de los dioses, se encuentra la clave del mensaje, pues son precisamente esos términos los *que* declaran la naturaleza, las funciones y los atributos que individualizaban a aquellos seres dentro del complejo panteón taino. Fue necesario no sólo confrontarlos con las variantes que aparecían en las notas que del manuscrito de Pané habían hecho Las Casas y Anglería, sino reconstruir, hasta donde ha sido posible, aquel idioma hoy desaparecido, para intentar el análisis estructural de los referidos términos y proceder al desciframiento de su recóndito sentido. Pero la obra ameritaba el esfuerzo, y el esfuerzo logró sus fines.

(translation to English)

Pané handed the manuscript over to Columbus around 1498. It ended up in Spain, and there in Spain it was viewed and used by both Pedro Martir de Angleria and Fray Bartolome De Las Casas. It then ended up in the hands of Columbus' son Fernando, who included it in his father's biography. In 1571 it was published in Italian as part of that piece of literature. After that, nothing is known about Pané's manuscript or about the originals in Fernando's possession.

The strange circumstances under which said documents disappeared has, over a period of time, caused the material gathered by Pané to become enmeshed in a dense fog of Columbus-related questions and doubts without end. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the Italian translation, already very defective in itself, circulated later in editions that even further did violence to the original. These were highly degraded editions. The general perception of later readers of these publications was very negative and there came a time when many even doubted the authenticity of the original work.

It is only in recent years that it has been possible to restore the original text, decipher its meaning and reinstate its real importance. Since the difficulties that caused the problems that this piece of work has suffered have been amply described elsewhere, suffice it to say that Fray Ramon fully and successfully accomplished the task set for him by the Admiral. His work "RELACION ACERCA DE LAS ANTIGUEDADES DE LOS INDIOS" considerably expands a mythic region barely illuminated by Columbus. This work constitutes the only direct testimony that we have available to us concerning what the ancient dwellers of the Antilles believed and dreamt. It is the very first ethnographic study of an Amerindian culture. Taking into account the date of its composition, this piece of work, after having been compared with other Native American mythologies that were studied later has passed the test of authenticity.

After having been perceived as an obscure and unreliable companion of Columbus, Pané has acquired the deserved reputation of being the founder of a mythographic tradition which later spreads to cover the whole continent and comes down to the present day.

The process of deciphering the text has been slow and tedious. The original in Spanish was lost, a fact that forced us to work with the Italian translation. The translation, in turn leaves a great deal to be desired. The principal cause of the errors in this translation is that the author, Alfonso de Ulloa left it behind in the form of a rushed outline when he died in 1570 in a Venetian prison.

In the posthumously published version there were whole sentences that had not been fully explicated. There were words and sometimes whole phrases missing. The work also suffered from the violent Italianizations of the names of places, people, mythic beings, and even objects. The indigenous terms were translated with very little care. Often these were missing some letters and at times other letters were read incorrectly. It is important to understand that it is in these Indigenous terms, especially the names of the gods, that we can find the very nature, the functions and attributes that individualized those beings within the complex Taino pantheon. It was necessary, not only to compare it with the variations that appear in the notes that both Las Casas and Angleria had made from the original (Spanish language) Pane manuscript, but also to reconstruct, to the point that it was possible, that ancient language which is now extinct. This had to be done before attempting a structural analysis of the said terms, and before proceeding on to the final decipherment of their intrinsic meaning.

Nevertheless the task deserved these efforts and ultimately the efforts yielded the intended results

Walter E. Roth

How the Moon got it's dirty face

http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/sa/aflg/aflg13.htm#pp_205

*HOW THE MOON GOT HIS DIRTY FACE

Long ago a brother and his sister were living by themselves. Every night after dark some one used to come and fondle and caress the sister, attentions which she was very far from being averse to, but she was very curious to discover who her unseen visitor was. She could never find out. She therefore blackened her hands one day with the soot from the bottom of the pepper-pot, and when her lover came that evening, she smeared her hands over his face.⁴ When day dawned she thus came to learn that it was her own brother who had taken advantage of her. She was extremely angry, abused him roundly, and told the neighbors, who in turn spread the story of his conduct far and wide. The result was that everybody shunned him and he became at last so thoroughly ashamed of himself that he declared he would keep away from everyone, and live by himself. He is now the Moon, and the marks which can still be recognized on his face are those which his sister imprinted with the soot (or blue paint) years ago. Even to this day women do not trust him, and no matter whether he is new, full, or on the wane, there will always be found somewhere a female who is in such a physiological condition as will preclude all possibility of the moon wishing to pay her a visit.⁵