

# TAINO CULTURE



Santiago Concepcion



Palm tree

When the Spanish landed in Borinquen They were greeted by a people of light, copper skin and medium in height, who had well-built bodies, agile movements, big, black and round eyes and straight black hair. These were the Taino Indians who greeted them with open arms, gave them food and friendship and welcomed them to stay as long as they wanted. What the Spanish saw was a nation whose civilization was just beginning, but with a well-developed language, religion, political organization, art, economy, agriculture, commerce, industry, culture and family.

Borinquen was politically, an independent nation, governed by local cacique (chief) who through the will, laws and customs of the people, was given power, and authority only in his territory. It was his responsibility to see that life and work ran smooth and normal. Once each local cacique was picked, they would all get together and pick on cacique who would be cacique of the whole island. When a cacique died, the people picked a warrior whom they felt was brave and would take the place of the cacique. This was not only held for men, but women could also be picked as in the case of a woman cacique Luiza, who governed the territory where today Loiza Aldea is located.

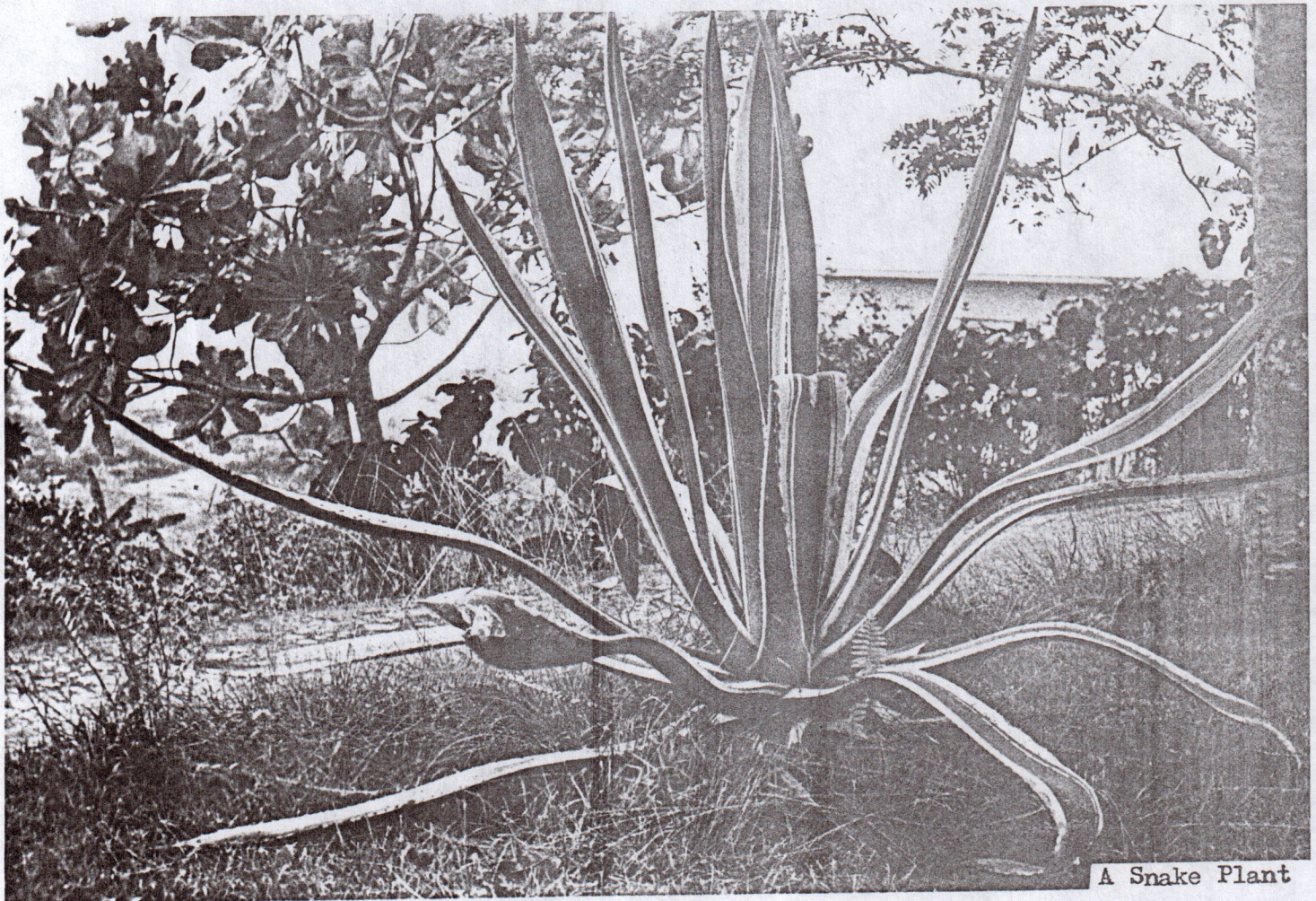
This woman was brave and courageous with the use of weapons, which shows that woman knew alot about the art of war. The cacique's symbols of power was that his "caney" (house) was shaped rectangular, while others had round "bohios" (houses). He was the only to wear a "guani" (a golden necklace) and the only one to sit on the "dujo" (a ceremonial seat). But otherwise he slept on a "hamaca" (Hammock) and ate and drank like the rest of the people.

The Tainos didn't have any money. What they did was to exchange products with each other. Like if you had a banana and I had an apple, you'd give me the banana and I'd give you the apple. Gold wasn't seen as a "God" like the Spanish saw it or like people see it today. All it was to them was a decoration. They didn't believe in private property except small objects of personal use that were necessary.

The most horrible crime between them was stealing. The maximum penalty was that the robber couldn't live in the "Yuca Yeke" (pueblo). (I don't know what he did after he was thrown out). Since property was communal the robber wasn't stealing against one person but against the whole community. This made the Tainos exceptionally honest people.

The Tainos did not have a written language. Their language (Taino Orarua) was spoken. That is, instead of writing they talked and instead of reading they listened. The people learned of their history, heroes, origin, etc. Through their "areytos". Areytos were ceremonies and celebrations that were religious and political and where the Tainos sang and talked about their history. They also had music, dance and poetry in the areytos. Another way of learning the Tainos used was by observing and practicing and communicating verbally. They didn't have any high schools or colleges. Their community and people was their school.

Religion and medicine was the responsibility of the "Bohique". The Bohique was the minister of religion and medicine. The Tainos believed in a just God was called "YukiYu". Out of rock the Tainos made "cemies" which were messengers of "YukiYu". Each family possessed a particular cemi. Each cemi of the



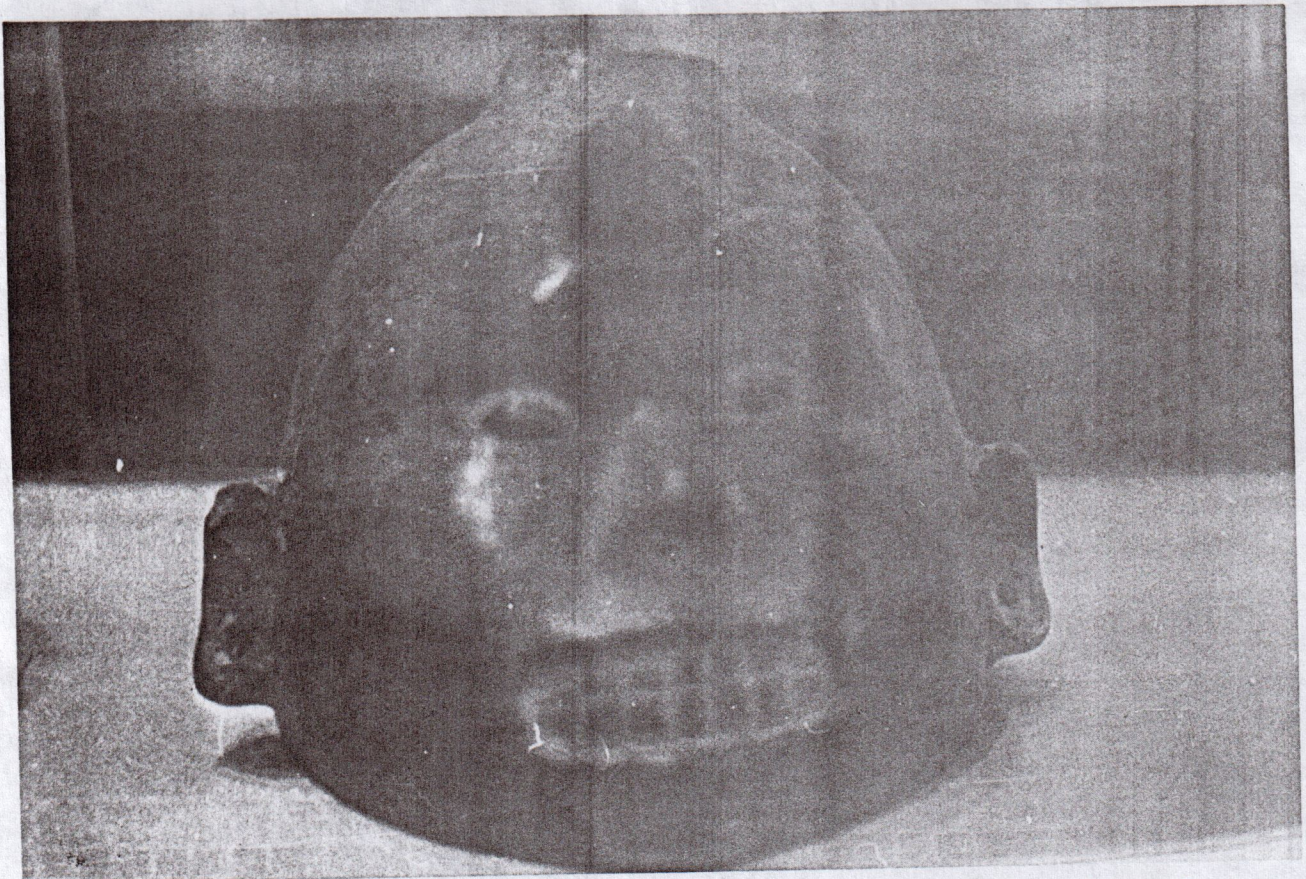
A Snake Plant

pueblo was kept and guarded well in the house of the "cacique" or the temple. In front of the cemi, they celebrated their sacred ritual, the "cojoba" in which only the cacique, the bohique and the nobles could take part in. (The nobles were the "naborias" (warriors), the upper class. The rest of the people were the "nitainos", workers and artists. The cojoba was lead either by the cacique or bohique. To lead the ceremony, the leader had to fast several days before the ritual. In front of the cemi there was a block, wooden table, polished very bright, which contained some powdered tobacco in a bowl and a wooden instrument shaped in the form of a Y, with 2 holes on the top and another on the bottom. After a series of prepared orations, the leader took the instrument and put the bottom hole into the bowl and the other 2 holes in his nostrils. Then he sniffed the powdered tobacco into his body. This would get him high. While he was high he had visions that he communicated with YukiYu through the cemi. Then after he got down from his high he answered any questions his people asked.

If someone who was sick was declared incurable or hopeless, he would ask to be taken away from his house and to be put in the woods. There they would take him food and water till he was cured or till he died. This practice had practical effects in the way that the person sick might contain a contagious disease or sickness and by taking him away from the people they escape a possible epidemic. When a person died, he was looked over by his parents and the people made sure that the bohique had attended him like he should have. If he didn't the parents were authorized to punish him. Usually they took him to the nearest woods and beat him with sticks. (If we could do this today, I know we'd all have a doctor to beat). What this shows is that the profession of medicine between the Tainos had many risks. Fasting, a bath with cold water, massages, potions taken from plants, laxatives, and prayers were some of the methods the Tainos used and which are still being used today.



Tobacco Field



Taino Indian sculpture from the Museum of Ponce. Unfortunately, most of the museum was given to European Art.

Escultura Taina en el Museo de Ponce. Desgraciadamente, la mayor parte del museo esta dedicada al Arte Europeo.

The Tainos were people who worked very skillfully with their hands. The Tainos inherited their paintings from their ancestors the "ignieris". Painting for them was used as an art and decoration and for industrial puposes. They knew the art and industry of pottery, in other wordshow to make utensils out of clay. Some of the utensils were decorated with drawings containing many colors. They also painted their bodies with different designs and colors. The dujos (seats) were made of solid stone, Their boats were built out of big trunks and the oars of wood. Spoons, guiros and drums were all made with different kinds of dry wood. The arrows and macanas were made of polished wood and the bow was made with a special kind of wood called "jugua". Certain works were assigned according to sex. In the textile industry the women were in charge of sewing and working with cotton. The men were in charge of building the fishing nets. In pottery both sexes shared the work. Specialized artisans were in charge of sculpture. Today there are caves in P.R. (La Cueva del Indio or Cueva de Miraflores in Arecibo) that at a certain time were workshops of the Taino sculptures. The Taino artist did not have metal utensils for sculpturing, but only simple ones made of stone. They used a hatchet and a "pulidor" which is similar to the brushes that modernsculptures use, but without the knife. The Tainos intelligence was open and quick. Proof of this is how fast they learned to speak and understand the Spanish language and also their work with stone.



Papaya tree      Arbol de Papaya



Green Bananas      Verde Guineos'

There are lots of words and things that we use all the time and that were invented by the Taino Indians. Many of our favorite foods come from our Indians: "batatas", "yucas", "maiz", "empanadas de Jueves", "casabe", "guanabava", "mamey", "anon". We even cook them the same way they did. The lists of things we inherited from them is even longer. The "hamacas", the tobacco and the habit of smoking, the guiros and maracas we use in our music, the skirts of "enaguas", the clubs or tobacco, canoa, coqui, mucero, batey, mani, caney, huracan, ausaubo, bohio, cacique, The Tainos practiced hunting, swimming and fishing, activities that were very utilitarian in practice but that always contained lots of fun and recreation. But there was a special game that the Tainos themselves invented: batu. Batu was played by men and women. Each team faced each other and one team would serve the ball to the other team who had to hit it back without letting it touch the ground. The team that let the ball touch the ground would lose. The ball was about 6 in. in size and weighed about 20 lbs. It's almost like volleyball but there isn't a net. It may sound easy but it's not, since you can't touch the ball with your hands. You can only serve the ball with your head, shoulder or waist. Play it and see that it requires techniques a lot of training and special agility.

The Borinquen nation was self-sufficient, that is, they produced what they consumed. Each territory also produced what they consumed. Only in case of a hurricane or an attack, those territories most affected by the disaster were forced to bring their product to a neighboring territory to trade till all reconstruction was finished.

For the Tainos the family was not a closed and limited unit as it is today. In reality the whole community was the

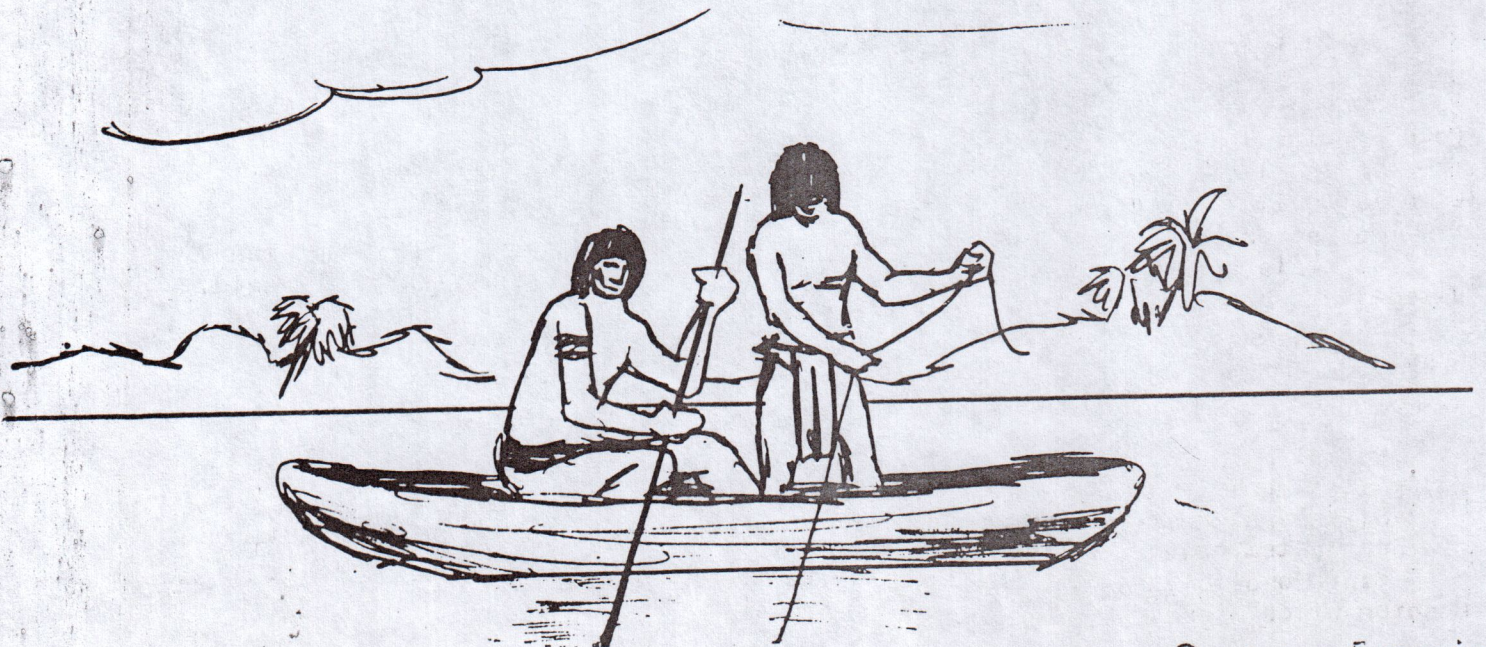
family. Each person was primarily responsible to the community as a whole. Now the Spanish came to Borinquen with the intentions of finding gold. When the Tainos saw them they thought they were gods and that they couldn't be killed. The Spanish took advantage of this by taking over the land, enslaving the Tainos and raping the women.

There was an Indian chief called Urahoan who did not believe they were gods and decided to prove to his people his belief. One day, a young Spaniard by the name of Diego Salcedo had to go from the north of the island to the south. When Salcedo was approaching Urahoan's village, Uraycan offered three Indians to help him across the river. Salcedo accepted the offer. When they got to the middle, the three Indians jumped on Salcedo till he drowned. Then they carried his body to the shore and waited. The Tainos were very nervous. They had heard that J.C. died and came back to life after 3 days. They decided to wait three days. All that happened was that the body began to smell. The Indians jumped and danced. The Spanish were not gods and they could be beaten. They ran to all the people shouting "They are not Gods, they are not Gods". The news spread to all the villages on the island.

The only war arms the Tainos had, the "Macanas" and "Flechas", were both made of wood. The Spanish on the other hand, had arms made of steel like swords, spears and knives, superior to that of the Tainos in hand to hand combat. They also had fire arms for long distance attack.. The Spanish covered their heads and chests with helmets and armor of steel.

The Tainos fought hard and brave, never giving the Spanish a chance but because of the war, oppression, slavery, the diseases brought by the Spanish, the physical and moral suffering, the Taino race extinguished. Today all we have are memories of a once united and peaceful people and if some of us are lucky a few drops of blood.

Ivan Calcano



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En noviembre del año 1971, gracias a John Moore y la fundacion de Robert L. Moore, cinco de nosotros fuimos a Puerto Rico por diez días. Exploramos con las grabadoras y las camaras queriendo traer alguna de la cultura puertorriqueña a la gente en el bajo Manhattan que se sienten nostalgicos. Estas paginas son el resultado de nuestras aventuras. Esperamos que la belleza de nuestras experiencias sea pasada a ustedes.

Esta emision esta en inglés y español. Hay algunas piezas que no estan traducidas porque en la traduccion pierden su mensaje.