

THE TAINO WOMAN

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By Bobby Gonzalez

The strength of a nation resides in its women. A political or cultural unit cannot truly grow or flourish if it suppresses members of the female gender and denies them basic rights. At the time of the European invasion in 1492, the Taino culture of the Caribbean islands was in the incipient stage of a classical era of a dynamic indigenous civilization. An integral component of this Taino civilization was and is the Taino woman.



We the Taino have always respected the significant role of the woman in our society. Columbus and his colleagues could not understand this respect. Their lack of understanding manifested itself in their ravaging of Mother Earth. Most of all, they showed their gross disrespect by the rape of our women. In a letter written by Michele de Cuneo is found the first written documentation of a rape in the Americas. The primary accomplice in the crime was Christopher Columbus.

The importance of the woman can be found in the traditional religion of the Taino. Unlike the Christian masculine creator, the creator of the world for the Taino is a female entity one of whose names is Atabeli. She made this world without the aid of any man. She also bore children without the help of any male energy. In our myths, our sacred teaching stories, it is almost always a woman who is the healer, the teacher, the giver of sacred gifts to the people. This holds true for men of the native nations North and South.

Fifteenth century Taino societies were characterized by the active participation of women in all aspects of political, social and religious life.

The cinema has helped to reinforce stereotypes of Native Americans. In the movies you always see Native American men as the chiefs. You never see a woman. However, women have always been in the position of chiefs in a number of indigenous nations. And in those nations where they are not chiefs, the women are often instrumental in choosing the chief or deciding whether or not to depose him. Today, the chief of the Cherokee is a woman by the name of Wilma Mankiller. The Taino had a great number of women who

occupied the position of cacique (note: cacica is not a Taino word; it is a Spanish variation of the Taino word cacique). One of these women was Anacaona who governed in the western end of Haiti. Luisa was a cacique in the eastern part of Boriken. There were other lesser known women chiefs such as Barohona and Maria de Luna.

Taino society was matrilineal. When a cacique died, the successor was the deceased chief's sister's eldest child. The administrative abilities and political skills of women were appreciated and utilized.

The Taino medicine person is called the bohique. This individual is entrusted with a number of duties including interceding with the spirit world, teaching the stories and histories to the young ones, and with healing the sick. The bohique is priest, doctor, psychiatrist and school teacher all rolled up into one. Many of the bohiques were and are women. We are told of elder women who were wise in the way of using herbs to cure the ill.

(Part two of The Taino Woman will appear in the next issue)

BENA KIBA GUA AJIA
(UNTIL AGAIN WE TALK)

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