

The Beaded Zemi
and the Role of the Circulation of Objects in the Conquest
of the Caribbean and its Contemporary Reinterpretation

Alyshia Gálvez
May 10, 1999
New York University
Department of Anthropology

Some of the natives carried green parrots that did not speak, perhaps from fright, and balls of cotton thread-- not as fine, certainly, as those obtained in other parts of the Indies. And they exchanged everything for some things that weren't worth a fig (Carpentier 1990: 82).

In September of 1997, after much negotiation, and with a million dollar insurance policy, an object made its first return voyage to the New World in five centuries. A short, squat, anthropomorphic figure, the object, referred to in this context as the beaded *zemi*, features two faces, a short torso, and a base which appears to be a belt wrapped around itself. The wood frame of the *zemi* is hollow and covered with cotton cloth embroidered with white and red shell beads, and in the head and shoulders, glass beads. One face resembles a mask and has animal features, made in part with Venetian glass, gold alloy and beads. The other face appears human; it is made of rhinoceros horn and has vegetable fiber "hair." Its description reads "Zemi. Dominican Republic. Early sixteenth century, Wood, cotton, shell and glass" (Bercht, et. al., 1997: 160).

The beaded *zemi* has belonged to Rome's Museo Nazionale Preistorico ed Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini" (founded 1876) since 1878 and in that institution was classified as an African fetish until 1952 when it was decided that it was actually made by the Taíno, the inhabitants of the Greater Antilles who flourished from 1200 to 1500 A.D. (Bercht, et. al., 1997: 158). Before its acquisition by the Pigorini museum, the *zemi* had, since 1680, been part of the Cospi collection, later the Museo Cospiano (Kerchache 1994: 162) (Appendix). That museum has since been folded, with other collections "of naturalists and royals," into the Giovanni Cappellini Museum of Geology and Paleontology in Bologna (Web Cit. 4).¹

The association of concepts of "culture" with objects is not new, indeed a good portion of anthropology since its inception has focused on "material culture" and its relation to groups of people. Countless studies have focused on the production, utilization, veneration, interpretation, preservation, repatriation, presentation and circulation (including exchange, sale and theft) of objects associated with one or another community. If objects can be understood as metonyms-- even partial-- of the people who produced them (see Clifford, 1988, p. 234, note), an object like the beaded *zemi*, in its squat little figure, can be imagined as a stand-in for multiple and complex meanings. I will attempt to show that the beaded *zemi* is a powerful symbol, which in its material composition, history, supposed history, and interpretation speaks volumes about the conquest of the new world by the Spanish. Further, in a contemporary context, it is perhaps an even more vocal sign of the relationship of Caribbeans in the U.S.

¹ The Marquis Fernando Cospi appears to have been an avid collector of pre-Columbian artifacts, though he may not have known it. The Cospi Codex, which now belongs to the University Library in Bologna is an Aztec codex which was thought to be an ancient Chinese book; Cospi said he did not how he had obtained it (Web Cit. 6).

and the Caribbean to their cultural identity and history. I will explore the relation between objects and culture, and the power of the categories art and artifact in a discussion of the arrival and display of the beaded zemi in the exhibition *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean*, El Museo del Barrio, September 1997- June 1998, as well as look at the role of the zemi and similar objects in contemporary assertions of Taíno identity. First, however, I wish to look at the historical record to reconstruct a little of the production and early circulation of objects like the beaded zemi in order to understand something of its significance.

Clifford writes, in reference to the tribal objects gathered for the Museum of Modern Art's "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern,"

"They are travelers-- some arriving from folklore and ethnographic museums in Europe, others from art galleries and private collections. They have traveled first class to the Museum of Modern Art, elaborately crated and insured for important sums. Previous accommodations have been less luxurious: some were stolen, others 'purchased' for a song by colonial administrators, travelers, anthropologists, missionaries, sailors, in African ports. These non-Western objects have been by turns curiosities, ethnographic specimens, major art creations... Some came to rest in the unheated basements or "laboratories" of anthropology museums, surrounded by objects made in the same region of the world. Others encountered odd fellow travelers, lighted and labeled in strange display cases" (1988: 189-90).

This paragraph describes quite accurately the trajectory of the beaded zemi and objects like it. Clifford's description of little human-like as travelers, shivering in dark museum labs, evokes the beaded zemi's treatment as a little person. While I worked at El Museo del Barrio in 1997, I heard discussions of "We're not sure if he can come. The Pigorini Museum is concerned for his safety," and later, "He's arrived!" in reference to the little figure. Every night, the museum guards would "put him to bed," placing a dark cloth over his display case to protect him from the light of the emergency lamps. When there was a debate as to whether the zemi might contain human remains, like another cotton zemi which contains a human skull, the beaded zemi was placed on a little pillow and walked by the exhibitions designer down Fifth Avenue to Mt. Sinai Hospital for a cat scan (which determined "he" is actually hollow).

The Taíno, conquest-era chroniclers wrote, used the word "zemi," sometimes "cemi," for their gods or images of their gods. In his diary, Columbus comments in depth on zemis, noting the Taíno had houses filled with wood and stone carvings called zemis which were the center of prayer and *cohoba* (a hallucinogenic inhalant) ceremonies. When Christians approached, the Taíno ran and hid the zemis in the forest, perhaps because, Columbus relates, once after a zemi was heard to speak in the natives' language, the Spanish gave it a good kick and noticed that it was hollow and had a horn in its back through which a person pronounced the *cacique*'s wishes (Cited in appendix, Bercht, et. al, 1997: 170). The zemis were believed to bring rain, good crops, children and health, and the Taíno were observed to speak with them, bury them in cultivated soil and trade them amongst one another (Pané 1974: 32-34). In some translations

of Columbus' diaries and other chronicles, the word *zemi* is used interchangeably with *cacique* (chief) or in reference to ancestors. Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, who, famously, never set foot in the New World but interviewed Columbus and others upon return to write *De Orbe Novo Decades*, relates "[the Taíno] are all now subject to the Christians, and all those who resisted are dead: not even a memory is now left of the *zemis*, who have been transported to Spain so that we might be acquainted with their mockery and the devil's deceptions," (Cited in appendix, Bercht, et. al, 1997: 175). To understand the beaded *zemi*, it is necessary to examine in greater detail the possible history of its production and circulation.

In the Fall of 1492, Columbus, we all know, arrived to the New World. Assuming he had determined a new route to India, he designated the islands he found the Indies and its inhabitants Indians. The spectacle of that dawn of October 12, with Columbus dressed in his finest garments, hoisting the banner of King Fernando and Queen Ysabel, has become an important part of the new world imaginary, whether it is recounted as a heroic arrival or the end of a golden age. Regarding the people who assembled on the beach to greet the foreigners, the impression at the time seems to have been "Good people, although naked," (Martín Fernández de Enciso, author of *Suma De Geografía* in 1519, cited in Gerbi, 1985: 83). The inhabitants of the Greater Antilles are referred to historically as Taíno, although Walker calls them Island Arawaks, to distinguish them from the groups of speakers of Arawak languages in the Orinoco River basin in Venezuela and from the Lucayans (sometimes lumped with the Taíno), who were inhabitants of the Bahamas, Jamaica and Western Cuba (1992: 13). In fact the word "taíno," which seems to have been gleaned by the Spanish repeating "españoles" indicating themselves and hearing something that sounded like "taíno" from their interlocutors, means "good" or "noble" in that language (Alegría, 1997: 21). It is not known how they referred to themselves. Exchange of material goods was important from the first meeting on the shores of what has since been called San Salvador, Columbus writes "they afterwards came to the ships' boats where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts and many other things; and we exchanged them for other things that we gave them, such as glass beads and small bells" (Bourne 1906: 111).

Urged on by a desire to explore the area and determine if gold was to be found, Columbus and his men pressed on, landing at several islands, until they reached the land called Aytí or Quisqueyá, which he named Hispaniola. On the Day of the Annunciation, December 18, a young *cacique* was brought by litter and canoe to Columbus' ship, which was anchored in Bahía de Acul. He he was probably a subordinate to Guacanagarí (Walker 1992: 123), "one of the the five great kings and lordships of this island," (see note 1 in Columbus, 1906: 193), who developed a reputation for being the *cacique* most welcoming of the foreigners. An attendant of the young *cacique* presented the Admiral with "a girdle, like those of Castile,

but of different material...with pieces of worked gold, very thin," (Bourne, 1906: 185). On December 22, Guacanagarí sent a canoe to the Spanish boats with another gift, a "girdle which, instead of a purse, had attached to it a mask with two large ears made of beaten gold, the tongue, and the nose," (Bourne, 1906: 193-4). Bourne, the editor of this collection of Columbus' journals, cites Bartolomé Las Casas in a footnote to this description of the girdle,

This girdle was of fine jewelry work, like misshapen pearls, made of fish-bones white and colored, interspersed, like embroidery, so sewed with a thread of cotton and by such delicate skill that on the reverse side it looked like delicate embroidery, though all white, which it was a pleasure to see, (note 1 in Columbus, 1906: 4)

An inventory of some references to this gift is in order. Regarding belts, Samuel Wilson notes, "the belt had special significance in Taíno culture...The belts that still exist today are laboriously constructed of spun cotton interwoven with objects like small shells (often thousands), pieces of gold and dog's teeth. In some cases a face presumed to be a principal Taíno god is woven into the front," (1990: 66). Wilson notes in a footnote, "This belt was perhaps one that is now at the Ethnographic Museum of Vienna. It was probably a gift from Carlos V to one of his German cousins" (1990: 66; also noted by Alegría 1994: 69). In fact, the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna still owns what is called in El Museo's catalog "Belt with zemi. Greater Antilles, Circa 1530" and in the catalog of *L'Art des Sculpteurs Taínos* as "Ceinture, Saint- Domingue, Fin XV^e- début XVI^e siècle" (Kerchache 1994: 58). In that catalog, the inside of the belt can be seen to have light colored cotton cloth, and its face is much as Columbus described, though without gold, which the Spanish routinely plucked out of objects to melt down (Bercht, et. al. 1997: 163). Walker also describes the belt and calls it "one of the best examples of Island Arawak art ever seen by Europeans," but believes it to no longer be in existence (Walker 1992: 133). He also cites Nicole Scilliaccio, "who mentioned '... a dozen belts, polished with admirable art, and some of them variegated with thin plates of gold interwoven in the cotton fabric with wonderful skill'" (Ibid.) Alegría mentions the beaded belt and notes that Las Casas describes seven "ceintures ou ceinturons en coton tissé ornés avec des coquillages, des grains en pierre, des masques, et des feuilles d'or" (Alegría 1994: 69). He also mentions an additional belt with two gold plated faces, as well as "deux zemis avec dix *pintas* (incrustations) en or," inventoried with many other objects with "incrustations" by a Cristobal de Torres, maître d'hôtel of Columbus (Ibid). Las Casas' inventories of the goods brought back to the Pope and Catholic royalty of Europe are little mentioned elsewhere, although Alegría notes that storehouses of the Vatican, and European museums and palaces may represent the "unexplored grottoes" where "new examples of Taíno art" may be expected to reside (Alegría 1994: 75).

The catalog of the *Taíno* exhibition at El Museo del Barrio constitutes the latest scholarship by some of the leading archaeologists and art historians who study the Taíno; it provides an interesting component to this examination of the belt and will bring my discussion back to the beaded zemi. Because the beaded zemi is not unequivocally mentioned in any of the chronicles and so little is known about it, Dacey Taylor, co-editor of the book and an anthropologist who specializes in pre-Columbian (Mesoamerican) art asked both Marco Biscione, Curator of the Pigorini's Oceanic Department, and Peter G. Roe, curator of Centro de Investigaciones Indígenas de Puerto Rico, to present their interpretations of the Pigorini zemi. Biscione notes in the first paragraph that stylistically, and in design and execution, the zemi is closely related to the Taíno beaded belt in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna, and further, that "the belt in Vienna... is identical in its use of materials, technique, and decoration," which "seem atypical of Taíno art" (Biscione, Roe and Taylor 1997: 158-9).

Peter Roe goes further than Biscione in insisting that "the Vienna belt was unquestionably made by the same artist" as the beaded zemi (1997: 167). It is this statement that I will deconstruct in order to conjecturally situate the beaded zemi in the conquest era as well as to analyze its presentation in El Museo's exhibition, and implications for contemporary Taíno cultural identity. First, taking Roe's statement at face value, what would have been the necessary conditions for the same artist to make both the beaded zemi and the belt held in Vienna? The belt contains materials which could have originated exclusively in the Caribbean, except for two pieces of glass in the eyes of the mask. As such, there is nothing prohibiting this belt from being the one described as a gift to Columbus on December 22, 1492. Columbus arrived to Hispaniola December 9. On December 12, three sailors were sent ashore where they captured a woman and brought her on board; Columbus wrote, "I ordered that some should be caught that they be treated well and made to lose their fear" (Bourne, 1906: 175). The woman was dressed and sent ashore with glass beads, hawks' bells and brass ornaments as an emissary of the foreigners. As such, the belt Guacanagarí would give Columbus ten days later could possibly have been adorned, as a return gift, with the glass the cacique was sent as a gift.

If the beaded zemi were made by the same artist, the most logical conclusion would be that it was made during the same period, and similarly presented as a gift, or stolen, from Guacanagarí. The problem is that the beaded zemi, as mentioned above, contains many non-indigenous materials. The zemi's Venetian blue and green glass beads and mirrors could also have been obtained by this supposed artist as trinkets from the Spanish and incorporated as new materials into established techniques, as bead work appears to have preceded contact with Europeans (Alegría, 1981). What can be understood, however, of the rhinoceros horn of which the face is made? This is probably the main factor which caused the zemi to

earlier be misidentified. Biscione notes that Colini, curator of the Pigorini's ethnographic department at the turn of the century wrote "it is believed to be from West Africa, due to the geometric designs similar to those of mats and carpets of Angola and due to the same type of head-dress and rhinoceros horn that make up the face" (1997: 162). It was Marie Schweeger-Hefel in 1952 who guessed that the zemi was Taíno and received confirmation from Ricardo Alegría and others (Ibid). Roe takes up the issue of the geometric designs and notes that the designs on both the belt and the zemi were based on two Saladoid elements, motifs derived from the fourth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D (1997: 167).² It is unclear how the rhinoceros horn was brought to the New World. There is no mention in the chronicles of the Spanish carrying with them anything like specimens of flora or fauna or anything of African origin, although European contact with Africa was nothing new. Biscione notes "the beaded figure ... combines European and African materials with indigenous ones" (1997: 163), without explaining how. Some have suggested that the horn must have been brought by African slaves after the start of the slave trade in the New World (1500 was the earliest arrival of slaves), but Roe remarks the horn must have been brought by Europeans because "the slaves could scarcely have carried anything except their shackles" (Ibid). It is quite possible that the horn had been brought before the start of the slave trade, as a personal effect, and given to Guacanagarí who had it incorporated into a design.

Leo Wiener would offer a different explanation for the arrival of the rhinoceros horn, which, although quite a marginal theory, is provocative to imagine. Edward Bourne, following the footnote in which Las Casas describes the beaded belt, adds "from this we learn that wampum belts were in use among the Indians of Española," (Bourne 1906: 194). Bourne's strange interjection about "wampum" belts is related to Wiener's extensive discussion of wampums in Volume II of *Africa and the Discovery of America* (1920 [1971]). Wiener closely examines, through etymology and some biology, the origin of plants and aspects of material culture which have historically been attributed to new world origins, to argue that they actually originated in the Old World, and that Africans arrived in the new world before the Europeans. He writes, "cotton, shell money and tobacco were introduced from Africa by European and Negro traders decades earlier than 1492," and argues they are "conclusive proof of Mandingo influence upon pre-Columbian America," (Wiener 1971 Vol. I: foreword). He notes that Canadian and New York wampum belts are related to Brazilian belts made of white coral, stones and bones and that they also have, ultimately, an African origin. The belts, he remarks, became a "precious ornament for European women" (1971 Vol. II: 258). He also points out Columbus' reference to *guanín*, the gold alloy the Taíno used to adorn objects and as jewelry, which he says is "precisely the same composition and bearing the same

² Saladoid refers to the South American horticulturalists, ancestors of the Taíno, who migrated from the Orinoco River area to the Lesser and Greater Antilles in 500- 0 B.C. (Wilson 1997: 16).

name, as guanine, frequently referred to by early writers in Africa" (1971 Vol. III: 365). The passage he is referring to is this one, from Las Casas account of the third voyage:

[Columbus] ordered the course laid to the way of the south-west, which is the route leading from these islands to the south...because then he would be on a parallel with the land of the sierra of Loa [Sierra Leone] and cape of Sancta Ana in Guinea...where he says that below that line of the worlds are found more gold and things of value; and... from there would go to this Española...and that he thought to investigate the report of the Indians of this Española who said there had come to Española from the south and south-east, a black people who have the tops of their spears made of a metal which they call *guanín*, of which he had sent samples to the Sovereigns to have them assayed, when it was found that of 32 parts, 18 were of gold, 6 of silver and 8 of copper (Las Casas in Bourne 1906: 327).

Jan Carew, not less marginal than Wiener, also picks up on this idea, which he notes is also promoted by Ivan Van Sertima and Barry Fell, among others, and argues that it is Eurocentrism which prevents most scholars from believing that dark-skinned explorers and sailors could possibly have arrived to the new world before light-skinned ones (Carew 1994: 199).

Clearly, only more sophisticated archaeological research and chemical dating can solve this problem. What is more relevant to my perspective is the ways in which scholars have used the presence of African, European and Caribbean materials in the beaded zemi to comment in ways still not justified by the facts available to them. In the exhibition catalog, Roe concludes his essay by arguing that the zemi "...combines all the elements of the Caribbean as a unique area, synthesizing the historical and material contributions of three streams of history and culture: the island Taíno, the conquering Spanish and the African slaves. The result was a truly pluralistic society, in history, customs and language," (1997: 169). Biscione, similarly notes "It may represent a supernatural character with coexisting Taíno, European, and African features. Foreign ideas had been introduced into the local culture, and through their reinterpretation, a new element of the supernatural came to the known, sacred matrix," (1997: 163). El Museo's web site also featured a description of the beaded zemi which concludes with this line, "the beaded zemi heralds a new phase in Caribbean art and reflects a multicultural sensibility that persists to this day," (Web Cit. 5). For such an enigmatic little fellow, the beaded zemi is being made to fill quite an ideological role, being extrapolated so by otherwise careful and understated scholars to represent the cultural synthesis in the Caribbean that the conquest produced. I will explore some of the stakes in this interpretation shortly.

Before beginning this discussion of contemporary interpretations, it is important to resolve how the beaded zemi and the belt might have been made. If, still assuming they were made by the same person, and if as Roe argues, the rhino horn were brought by Europeans who began the slave trade, the earliest date for the zemi's production is 1500. It is quite possible that an artist had a productive career lasting the eight years between the first voyage and the start of slavery, particularly if the artist were under the

patronage, in some sense, of Guacanagarí. Although he was nearly executed for the destruction of a Spanish community in Columbus' absence, he was spared by the Admiral out of a sense of friendship (the chroniclers say).³ As opposed to most other caciques in Hispaniola, Guacanagarí was not engaged in rebellion against the Spanish and was not murdered in the Spanish raid on a gathering of leaders in the countryside which wiped out the majority of native leadership on the island. As such, an artist who worked with him may have had a greater than average chance of survival, at least from violence. There is a problem here, however, with categories which indicates that it is perhaps the current scholars' own biases which cause them to attribute the belt and the zemi to the same artist.

I would argue that nothing inherent in the beaded belt and zemi or in those aspects of their history which are known indicates that they were produced by the same artist. Indeed, Biscione and Roe demonstrate that everything from the patterns of the beadwork to the hollowness of the eyes of the masks, to the shininess of the anthropomorphic face and the flat surface of the zemi's headdress are motifs found in many other objects in wood, stone and bone unquestionably made by the Taíno (1997: 158-169). Further, given the relative vulnerability to the ravages of time of cotton, which is the base for both pieces' beadwork, it can be assumed that these were not the only examples of this style of beadwork; they may simply be the only ones that have survived and been identified, a possibility reinforced by Las Casas' inventories of other beaded objects and belts. There is no more reason to conclude that these objects were made by the same artist than to guess that they were representative of a tradition of beadwork and production of belts and zemis which involved many artists, possibly in more than one community and island. I would argue that it is our particular historical moment in which there is an attempt to view non-Western objects, previously restricted to interpretation as ethnographic specimens, as art, masterpieces even, which is causing scholars like Biscione and Roe to imagine a single artist where there may be none. I explore the conditions for such a conclusion, such a search for "signature style" below.

Nelson Graburn writes that "in the nineteenth century it was commonly believed that what were then called 'folk' and 'primitive' arts were anonymous, that the artists and artisans were unknown and that the person who made the objects did not matter to the people of the culture where they were created," (1976: 21). In the same period, Clifford notes that art began to be "a special domain of creativity, spontaneity, and purity, a realm of refined sensibility and expressive 'genius,'" simultaneous with the

³ When the Santa María sank Christmas day on the first voyage, Guacanagarí encouraged Columbus to build a barrack and leave some men until he could return. Upon his return, he found the settlement of Navidad abandoned and the men dead. Assuming Guacanagarí was responsible, the Spanish captured and interrogated him. He demonstrated a wound and, weeping, explained that he had tried to stop it but that the men had been killed. Columbus believed and pardoned him. One account of Navidad's fate states the men divided into opposing camps with their Taíno women hostages and killed each other off, others state that other caciques raided them and killed them in punishment for stealing women (see Wilson 1990: 15, Guitart 1998b: 62)

separation of art from craft and more significantly for my purposes, art from ethnography (1988: 233). The idea of the artist as an individual genius as an historically specific phenomena is also explored by Coombe (1993). In recent decades, with rejection of words like primitive and with greater recognition of aesthetics in cultures outside the West, objects previously considered ethnographic are being revalorized as art. As such, many scholars, unwittingly perhaps, have inserted those objects' producers into a historically specific Western construction of the artist. Molly Mullin notes the valorization of Native American art by a few innovators in 1931 with the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, billed "Indian art as art, *not* ethnology" (1992: 395), although the idea that non-Western objects should be understood as art seems only to have achieved common acceptance since the 1980s with debates of multiculturalism and politics of representation.

As an institution invested in the debates of multiculturalism and representation, El Museo del Barrio has stakes in the classification of the objects it exhibits, and the categories "art" and "ethnography" are relevant to how the museum and its programs are viewed from outside. The implication in Roe, Biscione and other essayists' contributions to the exhibition catalog of a search for signature, for a hypothetical "Taíno artist" who made the "masterpieces" included in the exhibition is evidence of their involvement in a project of "art, not ethnology." The mission of El Museo at the time of the exhibition states, in part, that the museum is dedicated "to collect, preserve, exhibit, interpret and promote the artistic heritage of Latin Americans, primarily in the United States (Bercht, et. al., 1997) and, apart from the *Taíno* exhibition, most of its large exhibitions in the last several years have been firmly on the fine art side of division. However, a glance at the visitor comment book located at the museum's exit after a recent opening of an exhibition of emerging fine art, and a much smaller exhibition from the permanent collection of Puerto Rican carved wooden *santos*, indicates that El Museo is still not perceived by a good portion of its constituency as a fine art museum. Comments overwhelmingly center around issues of pride and identity: "It took me 48 years to come and see El Museo. I'm very happy that I took this step where we could see our culture. Thank you for having our heritage," "The museum educates and affirms," "Puerto Rico is represented like nothing else. Thank you for being here." Nowhere in many pages of comments did I see the word "art." While it would require more thorough ethnography to understand whether those museum visitors who go to El Museo to see "art" as opposed to "culture" are less likely to record their experience in a comment book, this is a telling indicator of the museum's image for important sectors of its audience.

The exhibition *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean* is quite relevant in the context of debates surrounding art and ethnography. The title itself is a good indication of the ambivalence

toward the 140 objects in the exhibition by the curatorial team-- "art" and "culture" are named as being linked but somehow not mutually comprehensive categories. The fifteen scholars who contributed essays to the catalog are similarly ambiguous in categorizing the exhibited objects. Jeffrey Quilter, in the catalog's Foreword implies that the ambiguity is intentional and "postmodern," avoiding the dualism of archaeology which categorizes "art and ideology as mere epiphenomena of more crucial engines of cultural change" and art history which isolates "aesthetic products...from the rest of culture" (1997: 11). Yet, I do not sense the same deliberateness to the ambiguity exhibited in other parts of the catalog. The inside cover of the exhibition catalog advertises that "over one hundred ceremonial and domestic artworks and individual masterpieces are shown" (1997). In the Preface, museum director Susana Torruella Leval refers to the objects as "artifacts of ceremonial or daily use" (p. 6). Alegría writes "the Taíno produced *images* of their gods from wood stone, clay and shell" (Emphasis added, p. 23) and elsewhere uses the word "artifacts" for the objects, noting some have more "artistic value" than others (p. 29). Maggiolo refers to the objects as of daily and ceremonial use (p. 39), but calls the *duhos* (ceremonial seats) and *zemis* "works of art," noting that Taíno pottery "reached an aesthetic level comparable to that of the most advanced ceramic cultures on the mainland" (p. 42, 43). While most other writers take similarly ambivalent stances on their categorization of the works, Maggiolo and Wilson situate the process of categorization critically, arguing "it is from the vantage point of the present that we regard Taíno ceramics and carved works in wood, stone, bone, and shell as contributions to a uniquely Caribbean style of pre-Columbian art" (Maggiolo 1997: 45) and, "in most New World societies, artistic expression was an integral part of daily life. This was true of the Taíno" (Wilson 1997: 17).

The physical presentation of the objects in the exhibition prolonged the play between art and ethnography. The objects were divided into thematic groups in rooms labeled "Caciques, Nobles and their Regalia," "Spiritual Ecstasy and the *Cohoba* Ceremony," "Religion and Cosmology," "The Ball Game," "Daily Life and Subsistence," and by its lonesome in a mini-gallery, "The Beaded Zemi." This arrangement sounds fairly "ethnographic," as choices of presentation were made more on functional distinctions than on aesthetic choices. However, the gallery walls were painted in primally primary colors, muted rust yellow, blue and blood red and the lights were low (in part for conservation purposes). There was an explanatory wall text for each of the above named themes, but each object had a simple label naming its origin and, except for the beaded zemi, "1200- 1500 A.D." There were no woodcuts of vignettes demonstrating hammocks, shamans or *cazabe* bread from Girolamo Benzoni's *La Historia del Mondo Nuovo* or Oviedo's *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* gracing the walls as they did the catalog and there was relatively little "ethnographic" description of the uses of objects in the main galleries.

Down a long hall towards the East Gallery, there *were* photographs of people in the Dominican Republic and the Amazon River basin in Venezuela, shot in 1992, preparing cassava with many of the same technologies the Taíno are thought to have used. In the far gallery "Taíno Legacy," an exhibition of photographs and videos, explored contemporary Taíno communities. As such, the bulk of the objects in the exhibition, although presented thematically according to functional distinctions, were presented as "art" for contemplation, more than for ethnographic imagining of ways of life. The beaded zemi, in particular, was displayed in a plexiglass case where he would be passed last, before a visitor went toward the "Legacy" portion of the show. He could be circled completely and pondered in his richly adorned muteness.

Jorge Estevez, Participant Coordinator at the National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], and a Taíno originally from the Dominican Republic who is active in Taíno organizations, noted that the disjunction between the legacy and the archaeological portions of the exhibition jarred him. He recalled that when he visited the show with his mother, she was quite engaged with the videos (one of which featured her) and contemporary photographs, but felt alienated by many of the archaeological objects because she felt little connection to them and unable to identify with their meaning in the manner in which they were presented (Interview with J. Estevez, May 3, 1999). When I asked how he might have curated the show differently, I was treated to a slide show of Estevez' version of *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean*. Estevez begins his exhibition with woodcuts and engravings from the Conquest era, visual testimony of the experience of contact. Several of the images would serve to highlight important historical moments, including cacique Enriquillo's fourteen year war with the Spanish which resulted in the first treaty between a European and an indigenous nation, and the attack on Taíno communities by the Spaniards' mastiffs. The bulk of the exhibition contains juxtaposed images and objects linking contemporary remnants and revitalizations of Taíno culture with pre-conquest and conquest-era representations. For example, Estevez displays an archaeological *burén*, the skillet used for cazabe bread, with a Benzoni woodcut demonstrating use of the *burén*, and a photograph from 1992 showing women in the Dominican Republic still using *burenes*, albeit of iron. The same juxtaposition would be made with canoes, culminating in a recent photo of Taíno-style dugout canoes used as water troughs. By advocating presentation of objects in this way, Estevez argues for a more ethnographic approach, emphasizing life ways and continuities and adaptations of Taíno material culture through time. When I asked about the stakes, from his perspective, of the classification of objects as art, archaeological artifacts or material culture, he remarked "from the Native point of view, these things are artistic, but they're just things you have in your house. Here [at NMAI] a lot of stuff is art, but its material culture." (Ibid.)

One way in which El Museo del Barrio took a proactive stance on the issues at stake in an exhibition like *Taíno*, less to resolve, than to problematize them, was to incorporate Taíno organizations, activists, and scholars, and scholars of the Taíno, in the exhibition and related programming. Fatima Bercht, co-director of the exhibition project, consulted with groups, individuals and scholars, here and in the Caribbean, from the beginning of the exhibition's planning stages. In the summer of 1997, about a dozen people participated in a day-long symposia to debate some of the issues which would be raised by the exhibition and discuss its purpose, including Estevez, Roberto Mucaro Borrero, an activist, musician and organizer of the United Confederation of Taíno People (Mucaro Borrero 1998); Arlene Dávila, an anthropologist who studies contemporary Taíno communities; José Barreiro, editor of *Akwe:kon Journal* of Cornell University and registered member of the Taíno Nation; Peter Ferbel, an anthropologist based in the Dominican Republic; among others. During the course of the exhibition (which was extended several months), El Museo sponsored several symposia including "Recent Scholarship in Taíno Art and Society" with Charles Beeker, underwater archaeologist in the Indiana Jones vein from the University of Indiana (See Beeker, 1997); Irving Rouse, professor and curator emeritus of anthropology at Yale and author of *The Taínos: The Rise and Decline of the People who Greeted Columbus* (1992), Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, Professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, and others, and "Rethinking Taíno: The Cultural Politics of the Use of their Legacy and Imagery" with Dávila, among others. The museum also presented performances by Cacibajagua, "Taíno Indigenous Presentation and Performance Troupe," (See Appendix), and Taíno Nation, a New York and Puerto Rico-based organization which is the tribal voice for Taíno artifacts held by NMAI (Ferbel, 1995: 52), as well as screenings of videos by Estevez, and others, reflecting current expressions of Taíno identity. Domingo Taíno, a public day-long opening of the exhibition featured performances, activities, and vendors of artisanry. Taíno organization members were a presence at all of the exhibition's programs. Mucaro Borrero notes that at one event, members of Consejo General de Taínos Borincanos, Presencia Taína, Maisiti Yucayeke Taíno, and Cacibajagua attended, and it was filmed by War Party Productions.

The involvement of members of Taíno communities in El Museo's exhibition was an important reminder of the stakes involved in the exhibition of objects like the beaded zemi and the ideological weight of such objects. Estevez remarked that NMAI recently repatriated an object to a Tlingit community, after years of requests and legal debates by the community. He noted that NMAI is responsive to indigenous communities and that the accession of new objects is always accompanied by ceremony and communication with the relevant communities. However, for objects related to the Taíno, patrimony is not so clearly defined. Coombe examines categories of property in relation to native communities and cites

UNESCO'S 1970 assertion that cultural property is a basic element of a people's identity, yet as she points out, such a legal definition is founded on western principles of property and individualism and assume continuity, homogeneity and boundedness as attributes of culture which simply do not apply to most Native American communities (if they apply to anyone at all) (1993: 264-5). Clifford engages in a similar discussion related to the Mashpee land claim (1988: 211-348). The Taíno are perhaps at an even greater disadvantage having been persistently categorized as extinct. In spite of El Museo's exhibition of aspects of "Taíno legacy" featuring, in part, living communities eating food, making pottery, and using vocabulary in ways known of the Taíno at the time of European contact, in the *Taíno* exhibition catalog can be found phrases like, "within sixty years after the arrival of Spanish colonists on the islands, the Taíno ceased to exist" (inside cover).

Indeed, between disease, forced labor and slavery, direct violence, and suicide, the Taíno population was dramatically reduced within the first decades of Spanish occupation. Statistics indicate that of the original population of Hispaniola, estimated at 300,000 by at least one ethnologist, by 1508, 60,000 were alive, by 1512, 20,000, and by 1548, Oviedo doubted 500 were still living (Walker 1992: 309-10). Walker writes that when "Drake sacked Santo Domingo on New Year's Day, 1586, he said no Indians were left on the island (Ibid). There are also reports that in 1542, when Queen Ysabel sent an emissary to the Greater Antilles to inform the Indians that they were emancipated from slavery, at the behest of Las Casas, he could not find anyone to tell. Further, a great deal of contemporary scholarship and popular literature writes of the Taíno as extinct, and only in 1993 did Taíno activists manage to remove the word "extinct" from the Webster's Dictionary definition of the word Taíno.

In fact, the supposed extinction of the Taíno by the Spanish has been an important part of nationalist projects in the Caribbean, used by *indigenistas* to accentuate the brutality of the conquest and by "white" elites to emphasize *hispanidad*, much as in many Latin American countries the "disappearance" of indigenous populations is not very nostalgically mourned as an unfortunate but long past side effect of European contact, which on the whole is viewed in a positive light (See, for example, Van Kessel, 1992).

Lynne Guitar is among a group of scholars who have begun to deconstruct the supposed extinction of the Taíno and total assimilation of the three originating cultures of the Caribbean. Guitar argues that the Taíno extinction is a myth promulgated first by the Spanish and picked up by the post-independence Caribbean nation-state (1998a). By comparing the letters of Spanish *encomenderos* requesting 200 or 500 more African slaves because all of their Indians had died or run away to the estate documents in which the same men's widows asked colonial officials what to do with the three hundred Indians their husbands had stowed somewhere, Guitar traces a systematic undercounting of Indians by Spanish settlers. If

encomenderos were taxed per head on Indian laborers on their estates, or criminally liable after enslavement of Indians was prohibited in 1542, they had a profit motive for undercounting (Guitar 1998b: 136). Further, Spanish officials, always concerned to hold onto their precarious power positions did not want their control over vassals and territory to appear to the crown as tenuous as it was. Revolts, like Enriquillo's, which lasted fourteen years, involved thousands of Indians and African *marrones* (fugitive slaves), and defied multiple Spanish attempts at suppression, were an embarrassment and could result in replacement by some other administrator. Guitar argues that many more Indians than have ever been imagined were not counted or waited out the most brutal years of the conquest in the hills (1998b). Recent genetic evidence supports such an argument, with recent testing showing seventy percent of a pool of fifty-six residents of Puerto Rico's Indieras region (one of the last known Taíno settlements on the island) and 53 percent of a pool of 38 selected at random have indigenous DNA (Ferrer 1999: 4). Peter Ferbel studies the myth of Taíno extinction from a contemporary perspective and notes that it continues to be reinforced by Dominican elites: "an admission of the survival of the Taíno is a critique of the state control of history and national identity" (1995: 170). Further, the Dominican Republic, he points out, makes much of saying it is the only nation with a majority of its population *mestizo*, mixed race (Ferbel 1995: 11). As such, assertions like Roe and Biscione's (1997), that the beaded zemi is a symbol of cultural synthesis must be understood as ideologically charged.

These powerful discourses which deny the possibility of a viable Taíno community present formidable obstacles to those who would argue that it is alive and kicking. As such, Taíno organizations have been drawn into the debates which have long raged in the U.S. about indigenous identity and legitimacy. In "What is an American Indian," a checklist produced by the American Indian Archaeological Institute, qualifications of tribal identity are listed, including "genetic lineage," "cultural involvement," and "social designation" (See Appendix). These and others were cited in the Mashpee land claim debate documented by Clifford, including also, territory, community, and leadership (1988: 334). Taíno organizations, having no claim to language, land or blood in any unadulterated sense, stand to lose by bringing up issues like blood quanta and territory. The Taíno Nation states in a bulletin, "whether we are full blooded or racially mixed, we take pride in our Taíno indigenous identity," and in 1992 declared itself "a people reorganizing" (Cited in Ferbel 1995: 52). Clifford argues

Cultures, we often hear, 'die.' But how many cultures pronounced dead and dying by anthropologists and other authorities have...found new ways to be different? Metaphors of continuity and 'survival' do not account for complex historical processes of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention and revival. (1988: 338).
Likewise, Ferbel insists, "criticism of the authority of Caribbean Indians and the importance of Indian

cultural heritage as a component of Caribbean ethnicity ought to be taken as a rallying cry for ethnographic investigation, not for distrust and dismissal" (1995: 53). Estevez argues that culture is as culture does, and that his Taíno identity rests on the oral traditions and practices with which he was brought up in rural Dominican Republic and in New York City. His grandmother and mother instilled Taíno identity in him through the recounting of myths and stories, making *cazabe* bread, and teaching him Taíno words and uses for plants and animals. He disputes claims that the Taíno language is dead, arguing that it has been subsumed by Spanish grammar; quoting his grandmother, he spoke a sentence which was composed mostly of Taíno words structured with a few Spanish verbs and pronouns.

Exhibitions like El Museo del Barrio's *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean* are quite relevant to such efforts to regain and revitalize cultural traditions by Taíno communities. First, the scholarly presentation of Taíno artifacts in a New York City museum is a form of legitimacy, reinforcing many of the oral histories and practices related to myth, ritual, leadership and subsistence which Taíno people have passed down for generations. The exhibition also served as a gathering point and catalyst for increased activity, drawing together--sometimes in hostility-- organizations and activists which have existed for varying amounts of time and with different levels of activity. Many museum visitors also "discovered" their Taíno identity or found that the exhibition reinforced a previously latent sense of affinity with their nations' indigenous past (evidenced by exit surveys and comment books during the exhibition), and surely some visitors went on to become involved with Taíno organizations. The exhibition may also have had a role in the start of the United Confederation of Taíno People which issued its first newsletter in January of 1998 (Mucaro Borrero 1998). However, as Estevez pointed out, the exhibition may also have caused a sense of alienation. The display of objects in sterile plexiglass cases, divorced from images or text indicating the lifeways related to them (apart from the introductory wall panels in each thematic area) and separate from contemporary images of such lifeways, indicating cultural innovation, change and hybridity, may not have encouraged identification on the part of museum visitors.

At this point, an argument for a relationship between an object like the beaded zemi and current assertions of Taíno identity is conjectural. To establish the importance of the beaded zemi and other Taíno objects from the conquest period to people from the Caribbean here and on the islands would require more extensive ethnography than this project allows. However, if the beaded zemi is viewed as a metonym, invested with and standing for larger cultural meanings, it can be understood, as I hope to have demonstrated, as a powerful symbol. The zemi itself may not be the kind of object which Taíno communities would wish to associate themselves. It speaks more of the force of the conquest than of survival and its continued possession by a European ethnographic museum is a continued reminder of the

appropriation by the colonists of objects of value and by extension, of their violence to previous modes of existence. The rhetoric of the tripartite cultural heritage of the Caribbean which is important in most of the nations of the Greater Antilles, is a metaphor dependent on the idea of synthesis and assimilation, the creation of a new hybrid, not reducible to any one of its components. In many ways, the beaded zemi has come to stand as an emblem of “the one good thing” to come of the violence of the conquest-- cultural pluralism, “The cultural hybrid vigor of a vanished Taíno artisan mined the resources of three continents to light a flame that never before burned so brightly, nor so briefly, yet whose embers smolder still in the cultures of the modern Caribbean,” (Biscione, Roe and Taylor 1997: 169). However, if Taíno communities envision a third way between nativist assertions of identity based on the exclusion or suppression of other elements, and racist elite’s official erasure of indigenous expressions, to promote a Taíno-informed identity comprehensive of change, innovation, and hybridity, appreciative of heritage and history, the beaded zemi just might be a symbol they can use.

- Biscione, Mark, Roe, Peter C., and Taylor, Dacey
1997 "Epilogue: The Beaded Zemi in the Pignorini Museum," in *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean*, exhibition catalog, Bercht, Fatima; Brodsky, Estrellita; Farmer, John Alan; and Taylor, Dacey, Eds. New York: the Monacelli Press.
- Bourne, Edward Gaylord, Ed.
1906 "Oriníazi Narratives of the Voyage of Columbus," in *The Northmen Columbus and Cabot*, New York: Charles Scribner and Sons.
- Carew, John
1994 *The Rape of Paradise: Columbus and the Birth of Racism in the Americas*, Brooklyn: A & B Publishers.
- Carpenter, Alejo
1990 *The Harp and the Shadow*, San Francisco: Mercury House, Incorporated.
- Clifford, James
1988 *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Coombe, Rosalind J.
1993 "The Properties of Culture and the Politics of Possessing Identity: Native Claims in the Cultural Appropriation Controversy," in *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, Vol. VI, No. 2: 249-285.
- Grever, Jorge
1999 Interview with author, May 3, 1999.
- Herbel, Peter
1995 *The Politics of Taíno Indian Heritage in the Post-Quincecentennial Dominican Republic: When a canoe means more than a water trough*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Univ. of Minnesota Graduate Faculty.
- Lerret, Melba
1999 "UPR study finds high 'Taíno' DNA" 16 in *the San Juan Star*, April 18, 1999: 4-5.

- Walker, D.J. R.
1992 *Columbus and the Golden World of the Island Arawaks*, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers.
- Wiener, Leo
1971 (1920) *Africa and the Discovery of America*, Vol. I, II, III, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., Innes and Sons.
- Wilson, Samuel
1990 *Hispaniola: Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus*, Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press.
- 1997 "The Taíno Social and Political Order," in in *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean*, exhibition catalog, Bercht, Fatima; Brodsky, Estrellita; Farmer, John Alan; and Taylor, Dicey, Eds. New York: the Monacelli Press.

Websites Cited

1. Pigorini Museum
<http://www.cineca.it/projects/aiace/pigorini/pamerica.htm>
2. Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Austria
vienna <http://wvtv.magwien.gv.at/d/mus/mus02098.htm>
3. Cospi drawing
<http://humanitas.ucsb.edu/depts/english/coursework/rar/index.html>
4. Capellini Museum
<http://www.unibo.it/Annuari/Annu9597/final/c3/p2/index.html>
5. El Museo del Barrio's description of the beaded zemi
<http://www.elmuseo.org/taino/zemi.html>
6. Cospi Codex
<http://northcoast.com/~spdtom/a-cod2.html>

Appendix

"Cospi Curiosity Cabinet."

and

Materials obtained at the National Museum of the American Indian's Resource Room, Taíno files, including:

"Background Sheet: What is an American Indian," by the American Indian Archaeological Institute.

"The Beaded Zemi," Description from El Museo del Barrio's Website.

"Structural Philosophies," Maisiti Yucayeke Taíno.

"Taíno Inter-Tribal council Charter."

"Cacibajagua."

"Taínos del Norte-- Declaración de Propósito."