

The Chief Is Dead, Long Live . . . Who? Descent and Succession in the Protohistoric Chieftdoms of the Greater Antilles

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Abstract. The rules of succession described in the early Spanish chronicles for Caribbean chieftdoms have been used by many scholars to reconstruct a Taíno kinship system. This article argues that these conclusions were reached by using unfounded assumptions, especially confusing rules of succession with rules of descent. Furthermore, it is suggested here that Taíno rules of succession were not simply about the right to govern through descent but were a form of customary law that was manipulated by chiefs to consolidate and stabilize power. Thus the vagueness present in the rules of succession could have been an integral part of the transmission system of the position of high office among the protohistoric chieftdoms of the Greater Antilles.

The first indigenous group encountered by Christopher Columbus in the New World was the Caribbean Taíno. The Taíno, who belong to the Arawak linguistic family (see Rouse 1986, 1992), traditionally are thought to have inhabited a broad area stretching from the Virgin Islands and northern Lesser Antilles to the eastern part of Cuba, including the Bahamian archipelago and Jamaica.¹ Taíno sociopolitical organization may have been quite varied, but most Taíno groups evidently were chieftdoms, or *cacicazgos*, that ranged from simple two-level hierarchies to paramount chieftdoms, which, through the medieval eyes of the Spaniards, looked like feudal kingdoms (Curet 1992a; Wilson 1990: 5).

The Arawak or Taíno Indians of the Greater Antilles were the first Amerindian group of the New World to experience the full impact of the conquest and colonization. Fewer than sixty years after initial contact, the Taíno essentially were eradicated. Due to this quick extermination few European descriptions of the Taíno are available. Despite the scarcity of

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documentary evidence, however, historians, ethnohistorians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have attempted to reconstruct Taíno society as much as possible by squeezing and stretching the information provided in the Spanish chronicles. Unfortunately, this sort of uncritical approach tends to produce overly simplistic views of indigenous cultures. An example of this is when researchers often reconstruct Caribbean social organization through an examination of kinship and descent. Most of the evidence used in these reconstructions, however, is taken from what seem to be vague and contradictory documentary descriptions. Thus, following Rouse (1948), most scholars propose that the Taíno were organized into matrilineal descent groups. In this article, I suggest that these conclusions were reached by using unfounded assumptions, especially by confusing rules of *succession* with rules of *descent*.

More specific goals of this work are to (1) demonstrate the dangers of using the chronicles in an uncritical manner, (2) critically reevaluate the descriptions in the chronicles of rules of succession, (3) review the conclusions reached by previous Caribbeanists on Taíno social organization and rules of descent, and (4) briefly examine the rules of succession within the political context of the cacicazgos (chiefdoms) and/or the elite of the Greater Antilles. I propose (1) that rules of succession cannot be equated with rules of descent and (2) that Taíno rules of succession were not simply about the right to govern through descent; rather, these rules were a form of customary law that could be manipulated by chiefs, or *caciques*, to consolidate and stabilize their power. In short, the rules of succession could be employed to promote factionalism or to create friction among the cacicazgos' heirs according to the political strategy of certain leaders, nobles, or factions within the elite. An indication of the simplistic view presented in the chronicles is the ethnographic record that tends to show a great deal more complexity in relevant modern cases than the sixteenth-century written record indicates. I suggest that future ethnohistoric studies could clarify many of our concepts of prehispanic Caribbean societies through similar considerations of the ethnographic record. Thus, before addressing the specific case of succession and descent in the Greater Antilles, I offer a brief discussion of succession based on anthropological theory and data.²

The Anthropology of Succession

Rules of Succession and Customary Law

In studies of the sociological aspects of succession, many anthropologists (e.g., Burling 1974; Comaroff 1978; Goody 1966; Hamnett 1975) distinguish among descent, inheritance, and succession to high office.³ These

three forms of transmission employ similar processes that involve passing down social or material resources from one generation to the next. Yet, while these concepts seem similar in principle, they do not necessarily work in the same ways in all societies.

In stratified societies, disjunction among political, economic, and social institutions are pronounced. Elites often disconnect these different institutions in their efforts to restrict access to power and status. Inheritance, land tenure, and succession do not always operate on the same levels. Succession to high office is always political, while inheritance and land tenure are not necessarily so (e.g., Helms 1980; Goody 1966; Hammett 1975). For example, a major difference between the transmission of inheritance and succession is that, contrary to property, which might have alternative sources of supply, high offices are scarce resources that in most of the cases center on a very narrow segment of the community.

Rules of succession are not fixed; Hammett (1975: 14) defines them as customary laws, “a set of norms which the actors in a social situation abstract from practice and which they invest with binding authority.” Contrary to legal systems in which all norms are mutually consistent in themselves and in their implications, customary laws can be manipulated: “The concepts . . . [that customary laws employ] . . . are not rigorously defined; logical ordering exists more by chance than on principles of structure; the scope for deduction is very limited; it is far from being logically complete; and its rules are not always mutually consistent” (ibid.: 9). Further, while customary laws have a social origin and character, some people may be regarded as more authoritative exponents of the law than others, especially in stratified societies where specialists may exist to deal with “legalistic” issues.

Rules of Succession and Transition

One of the most critical moments in the stability of a relatively successful chiefdom is the transitional period immediately after the death of the chief. The death of a leader creates an immense amount of stress and friction, since it tends to enlarge power struggles among different factions within the political structure. This friction develops between potential successors, or between legitimate candidates and powerful but illegitimate contenders to the high office.

The degree of instability created by the death of a chief varies according to the characteristics of the society’s system of succession. In some cases, rules of succession are automatic; that is, they are strict and specific, not unlike the rules of succession among European kingships. In other cases, rules are flexible, allowing the successor to be chosen from a pool

of candidates. Both processes have strengths and weaknesses. The “automatic” option should reduce chances of conflict during succession from one ruler to the next, while the “flexible” versions can foster conflict. Automatic procedures, however, can place an inept and unfit candidate in power, while flexible approaches may allow the best candidate to prevail. The competitive nature of the flexible process produces conflicts and oppositions among the potential successors that tend to ensure that the successful candidate will be the most politically powerful and astute, which are characteristics cherished in a strong leader. Yet, even within these frameworks there are gray areas. In flexible situations the selection of the new chief may retain some degree of specificity (e.g., where the chief chooses his successor *pre mortem*); conversely, succession can remain vague if automatic rules specify a range of possible candidates.

Despite western ideas, strict rules of succession with automatic lines of succession are rare in cultures throughout the world. In fact, no system is completely automatic and without uncertainty (Goody 1966: 13). This ensures that incumbents have the qualities demanded by the position of the high office. Some flexibility must exist or the “dynasty will find itself out of power through inadequacy or incompetence” (*ibid.*). In uncertain succession, allowance can be made for achievement as well as ascription. Therefore, flexible rules of succession do not mean a complete absence of heredity. In many cases succession will be hereditary, but if a chief is totally unsuitable, particularly in a crisis or emergency, he or she could be passed over in favor of a better man (or in some cases, a better woman), preferably a member of the same family. This combination of automatic and flexible rules of succession is a compromise to reduce conflict during times of transition, reduce friction between ruler and possible successors, and ensure a fit successor. However, the degree of mixture of each system varies from society to society and is dependent on the social situation. Different systems solve specific problems and produce their own particular dilemmas. The flexibility of each system also means that it is vulnerable to manipulation by the different interested parties and that the rules can change through time, a characteristic that should not be underestimated nor ignored in the study of succession among chiefdoms.

The various ways in which rules of succession fluctuate highlight the differences between customary laws and laws in the fixed, legal sense. I illustrate this statement with Hamnett’s (1975) case study from the Sotho nation (Lesotho). This polity was founded in 1831 by Moshoeshe, who after considering several candidates chose to pass down the high office to his eldest son. According to Hamnett (1975: 28), successive Lesotho chiefs had two ways of manipulating the legal system, which he refers to as “retro-

spective” (or automatic) and “circumspective” (or vague) methods. Retrospective manipulation fostered the perception that the prior chief’s plan was firmly established; in other words, Moshoeshoe’s decision to pass his office to his eldest son was seen as a “law.” The circumspective way of dealing with succession, in contrast, focused on the process rather than the decision. Community leaders granted themselves the option to choose the candidate they felt was the best successor. Depending on the leader and the historical context, the succession system in Lesotho shifted back and forth from an automatic system to a vague one. Furthermore, the fact that the systems are dynamic and adaptive implies that they can also be manipulated by either rulers, potential successors, illegitimate candidates, political factions or the ruling elite as a social group for their own benefit in order to acquire, increase, and/or maintain political power. Comaroff (1978) presents another instance of manipulation of the rules of succession in Africa. However, in this case the different factions involved in the decision manipulated both the rules and the dynastic positions of the candidates: genealogies were manipulated to select illegitimate but fit candidates as heads of states.

Therefore, systems of succession are dynamic entities, and they may adapt in order to be appropriate to different social conditions.⁴ The manipulation of the automatic rules can happen mainly under three circumstances: when there are a number of political factions struggling for power, when the automatic successor is not fit for the position under normal circumstances, and in times of crisis and emergency, where one candidate is better positioned to deal with the situation. As the few ethnographic cases considered here illustrate, the dynamic nature of customary laws renders ethnohistorians’ interpretations overly simplistic.

Succession in the Chiefdoms of the Greater Antilles: The Ethnohistoric Evidence

In this section I describe the vague and sometimes contradictory European descriptions of succession in the Greater Antilles. My discussion includes the three most frequently cited and accessible published sources: Bartolomé de Las Casas (1967), Pedro Mártir de Anglería (1964), and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1959). These sources were selected over others for two main reasons. First, they all provide a version of rules of succession, and second, they all were written in the early years of the conquest of the Caribbean.

Bartolomé de Las Casas presents the simplest description of succession in the Greater Antilles. Las Casas (1967, 2:318) recognized that his

knowledge of this process was limited, and he noted only that the son of the chief's sister (rather than the chief's own son) inherited the position of high office. According to Las Casas, the natives claimed that this rule was important because the sister's child certainly shared the chief's own bloodline, while this could not be proven with his own children. Mártir de Anglería (1964, 1:371) offered a similar but more complex scenario. He listed five alternatives: (1) the first candidate for succession was the firstborn son of the oldest sister of the chief; (2) failing such a son, then the firstborn of the second sister; failing such a son, then the firstborn of the third sister; and so on; (3) failing sisters' children, succession passed to the chief's brothers; (4) failing brothers, it passed to the chief's sons;⁵ and (5) failing all of the above, the position of high office would pass to the person with the reputation of being the most powerful individual on the island, such as the leader of another chiefdom, in order to defend the original chief's subjects from their enemies.

Fernández de Oviedo (1959: 121) provides the fullest, most complex, extensive, and—to a certain point—confusing description of the rules of succession. This version differs greatly from the previous two. According to Oviedo, the chiefdom and estates passed first to the eldest son of any of the wives of the chief. If the eldest son, after inheriting the position, had no son of his own, the estate passed to the chief's sister's son or daughter, since this child would be more certainly a true descendant of the family line. However, Oviedo added a perplexing note: if the cacique died without offspring, his sister's sons would not inherit the cacicazgo if the chief had a brother by the same father. This brother, then, would inherit the portion of the chiefdom that derived from their mutual father. Likewise, the relative closest to the mother would inherit holdings derived from the chief's mother. Helms (1980: 725) interpreted Oviedo's statement as evidence for bilateral inheritance among the Taíno, in which estates were inherited from both sides but were kept separate. Yet, this explanation is only partly convincing, since it does not explain why there are two versions of what happened when the chief had no sons.

The discrepancies in these accounts are the results of various factors, including the differences in the chroniclers' own perspectives (Alegría 1997). Of the three writers, Las Casas was probably the most familiar with the native cultures in their pre-contact state. He arrived in the Caribbean early enough to be involved in the conquest of Cuba as a clergyman. After witnessing some of the atrocities of the Spaniards he became a defender of the indigenous people in the Spanish court. Based on his writings, he seems to have been more knowledgeable on the cultural practices of the indigenous groups of Cuba and Hispaniola, where he spent most of his time

in the Caribbean. However, while he came to the islands relatively early in the colonization of the New World, it is important to recognize that he knew little about succession. Furthermore, he wrote most of his publications in his old age and decades after his experiences in the Caribbean. This could have created memory failure and the confusion of the traditions of one group with those of another.

Mártir de Anglería never visited the New World; his writings were based on interviews and conversations with Europeans who came from the Caribbean early during the conquest. Nevertheless, despite not being an eyewitness to many of the events and cultural practices that he reported, my experience is that Mártir de Anglería's writings are relatively accurate when compared to other chronicles and the ethnographic record. The information that he described on succession was provided by Andrés Morales, whom Nicolás de Ovando, governor of Hispaniola, sent to do a reconnaissance of the island. While this is one of the few instances in all of the chronicles where the informant who provided the information is revealed, it is not clear how Andrés Morales acquired the information. For example, did he get it from other Spaniards who lived in different parts of the island? Or did he learn it from some native people, elites or commoners? Or instead, did he observe directly some of the traditions he reported to Mártir de Anglería? The lack of further information maintains a certain degree of vagueness on this version of the rules.

Fernández de Oviedo arrived in the Greater Antilles in the early 1530s, about forty years after the first contact between the islanders and Europeans and at least ten years after the end of the conquest. By this time the indigenous population was greatly diminished, and remaining natives may have been influenced by or had adopted many European traditions. Also, by this time the Spaniards were bringing slaves from the Bahamian archipelago and the Lesser Antilles. Thus, some of the natives whom Fernández de Oviedo observed might not have been direct descendants of the original populations of Hispaniola when Columbus arrived. Another problem that complicates the reliability of this chronicle is the many prejudicial and racist comments that Fernández de Oviedo makes against indigenous populations on many occasions throughout the document. For this reason, scholars take many of the accounts described by Oviedo very cautiously.

Thus, differences in timing and the nature of the information recorded (primary versus secondary) probably had some bearing on the variations in these accounts. Another problem is that some of the chroniclers may have extrapolated rules of succession from one island or one chiefdom to other islands and chiefdoms. As in many parts of the world, Europeans tended to generalize about native cultures and to obliterate any distinctions among

cultural groups. Additionally, in most of the cases the sources of information are poorly identified. Most of the chronicles give the impression that the information was obtained originally through interviewing indigenous informants. Yet, it is not clear whether these individuals were from the same social group (i.e., nobility or commoners) or were individuals from different sectors or strata of society. Furthermore, we do not know if these rules were behavioral (i.e., actual) or ideal (i.e., normative) in nature. Many of these concerns complicate even modern ethnographies, and they should not be ignored in the pursuit of ethnohistory.

Further, we should consider the likelihood that the Spaniards probably transformed a series of viable options for succession into a sequence of strict “laws” à la European style. This indication of hard and fast rules implies the presence of a legal system (versus customary law) not characteristic of most chiefdoms.⁶ As a consequence, it is highly improbable that the chiefdoms of the Greater Antilles had a strict and standardized set of rules of succession presented in the chronicles produced under the European bias of the writers or informants. In her classic study of succession, Helms (1980: 719) cautioned that “since the Circum-Caribbean data were recorded by European soldiers, missionaries, and government officials, the possibility of ethnocentric skewing of their accounts must be recognized . . . it is possible, for example, that the definitiveness of some statements regarding succession by the eldest son reflects European expectations of primogeniture.”

In summary, the accounts of succession among the cacicazgos of the Greater Antilles should not be taken as complete and reliable sources of information. Yet, these written descriptions constitute our strongest source of empirical evidence, especially since the archaeological record has little to offer on this subject. I suggest that we view the documentary information on rules of succession through critical eyes, remembering that they probably were not European-style laws but flexible or customary laws.

Succession in the Chiefdoms of the Greater Antilles: Previous Interpretations

Since the early days of Caribbean studies, archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians have used sixteenth-century accounts to determine various aspects of indigenous societies. A great deal of this research focused on the role of matrilineal descent among the Caribbean cacicazgos and equated succession with rules of descent. I will review a sample of the best-known studies, which were selected to provide examples of the different tendencies among Caribbeanists.

In 1948, Irving Rouse, using mostly ethnohistoric information, published what has become a classic article on the Arawak groups of the Greater Antilles. Although some scholars have criticized this work as a superficial study, at the time of its publication it was one of the best compilations of Taíno cultural practices. Unfortunately, many of the mistakes in Rouse's work have been repeated uncritically; few people have questioned his interpretations, and his article still is used as a substitute for original sources. This is especially problematic because Rouse did not always provide complete references; due to this format, it is difficult to distinguish between the data and Rouse's interpretation.

In his discussion of succession, Rouse (1948: 529) apparently used a slightly modified version of the account presented by Mártir de Anglería, which led him to conclude that offices and titles were inherited matrilineally. Later, he extends this interpretation to the rest of the population by stating, "Residence seems to have been patrilocal, despite *the matrilineal inheritance*" (Rouse 1948: 231; my emphasis). Again, it is difficult to determine how he reached this conclusion, but the general impression is that the rules of succession among the elite were extended as rules of descent for the population at large. In a more recent publication, Rouse (1992: 16) reiterated that the Taínos in general (i.e., elites and commoners) traced their inheritance through their mothers.

Another important ethnohistoric study is that of Roberto Cassá (1974: 144–5), who equates rules of succession and descent among the Taíno of Hispaniola. Cassá relied on the three versions of the rules of succession presented above and an additional account included in López de Gómara's (1954) secondary compilation. According to Cassá, the variations in the chronicles reflect a system in transition, from matrilineal to patrilineal rules of succession and descent. He concluded that this process ultimately created a bilineal rule of succession, although this varied from tribe to tribe. Contrary to Rouse, Cassá thought these rules applied only to caciques, while commoners had different concepts of kinship and descent.

Ethnohistorian Jalil Sued Badillo (1979, 1985) also addressed the issue of succession, basing his reconstruction mostly on Mártir de Anglería and Fernández de Oviedo. Like Cassá, Sued Badillo (1979: 29) saw the documentary contradictions as evidence of transition from matrilineal to patrilineal rules for succession. However, his arguments for Taíno matrilineality were based less on documentary evidence than on ethnographic analogies with South American groups (1985: 19).

Francisco Moscoso (1986: 390–1) dealt with the topic of succession from a political perspective. He relied only on Las Casas and Mártir de Anglería. Despite the focus on the political aspects, Moscoso (1986: 391)

believed that the matrilineal emphasis on succession suggested a tendency for “filial relationships” to be matrilineal among the Caribbean groups.

William F. Keegan (1992: 92–3, 1997a: 73, 1997b: 112; Keegan and Maclachlan 1989: 68) also thought the Taínos were organized as matrilineal descent groups. For Keegan (Keegan and Maclachlan 1989: 618), references to patrilineality refer to “an exceptional practice that may have been brought about by the Spanish disruption of the indigenous social system.” To explain the apparent contradiction between such a matrilineal descent and patrilocality, he suggests that the Taíno chiefdoms practiced “viril-avunculocality” where, after marriage, the couple went to live with the husband’s maternal uncle.⁷ While Keegan (1997b: 116) specifies that the avunculocality rule was practiced mostly by the elite, he still sees matrilineal inheritance as a characteristic of the cultural group.

Finally, Samuel Wilson (1990: 117) also believed that the Taíno were “a predominantly matrilineal society.” However, Wilson (*ibid.*: 34) was aware that “the patterns of kinship, residence, inheritance, and succession among the Taínos are more complex than we currently understand and involve conflicting and overlapping principles of marriage, inheritance, and succession.” Despite these early comments, in a recent article Wilson (1997: 46) states that the Taíno of the Greater Antilles were organized in matrilineal descent groups.

In sum, four points emerge from previous studies on Taíno rules of succession: (1) in general, these researchers broadly applied rules that probably were recorded exclusively for limited areas of Hispaniola, (2) these studies equated chiefly rules of succession with matrilineal descent rules, (3) some researchers applied chiefly rules to the rest of society (*i.e.*, commoners), and (4) some researchers discounted the transmission of high office from chief to son as the product of either European influence or a system in transition. It is my contention that the first three points are not well founded, and some of them are based on weak assumptions. These points will be critically evaluated in the rest of this section.

In the past, interpretations of Caribbean societies in general tended to rely on information gathered mostly in Hispaniola since the majority of the chroniclers concentrated their descriptions on this island. The main argument for justifying the extrapolation of this information to other islands was the assumption that (with few exceptions) the native populations from the Greater Antilles, and possibly the Bahamian archipelago as well, constituted a single cultural group.⁸ The bases of this argument were several statements presented in some of the chronicles (including Columbus’s diaries) where it was specified that all of the islands were occupied by people of similar cultural background. However, more recent studies provide new in-

formation on inter- and inraisland variation. For example, Veloz Maggiolo (1993) has presented both ethnohistoric and archaeological data to demonstrate that even within the same island (Hispaniola) the term *Táíno* is too inclusive, masking cultural variability that is crucial for the understanding of indigenous societies. As an example, one commonly cited ethnohistoric description of the presence of communal houses in Hispaniola and Cuba often is taken as an indication that housing practices were similar across the Caribbean; yet, it has been shown (Curet 1992b) that late prehistoric and early historic houses in Puerto Rico were so small that they probably sheltered nuclear families.

Other evidence for Caribbean cultural variability is found in material evidence of ritual activities. Puerto Rico is rich in ball courts, plazas, stone collars, elbow stones, and large three-pointed idols. In contrast, while some plazas and ball courts have been recorded for Hispaniola, much more typical of this island's ritual inventory are sizable wooden and stone idols, effigy vessels, and bottles. (These items also are found in Puerto Rico but in much smaller quantities.) Finally, in a recent paper (Curet and Oliver 1998) we noted that most burials in late prehispanic Puerto Rico occurred within the context of the domestic unit. In contrast, evidence for cemetery burials have been reported for some parts of Hispaniola (e.g., Veloz Maggiolo et al. 1973). Given this new archaeological evidence, the basis for assuming cultural homogeneity in the Greater Antilles is weakened. This view is even more complicated if chiefdoms were composed not of one single cultural group but of multicultural groups, as Anderson-Córdova (1990) has argued. This would imply that the heterogeneity is not only at the intra- and interisland levels but also within the territory of a single cacicazgo. This increases the probability that different kinship descent rules were practiced even within single polities.

The second general point, the use of chiefly rules of succession to derive rules of descent, is also based on unfounded assumptions. Helms (1980: 719; emphasis in original) warned us about this mistake: "It must be emphasized that references to inheritance of office via the patri-line or the matri-line refer to rules directing individual access to specific positions and privileges and should *not* be taken to mean that lineages were basic social units unless such is specifically stated." Thus, rules of succession do not necessarily mean rules of descent. Different processes can govern each transition, and the dynamics can be markedly different.

These differences between descent and succession become more marked in stratified societies for a number of reasons. One reason is that in stratified societies social institutions become disconnected from each other, producing an increase in social specialization, which reduces the overlap-

ping functions of two or more institutions. Another reason is that in stratified societies, social relationships and institutions are disembodied from the kinship networks that prevail in many egalitarian societies. If kinship networks are retained in the transition from egalitarian to stratified societies then the elite will always be attached to a system of obligations with the rest of the population undermining their high status and position in society. Therefore, one way of dismantling these obligations and transforming status and power as a scarce resource is by creating rules of succession separated from kinship's rules of descent. Another way will be by creating descent rules for the elite that are different from the descent rules of the commoners.

Moreover, contrary to lineal rules of descent, some of the rules of succession described in the chronicles for Hispaniola include both matri- and patrilineal inheritance. It is important to note that I recognize that kinship rules are not strictly applied in practice, and exceptions are handled in many ways, including through fictive kinship. However, normally neither these exceptions nor the flexibility of the system are stated explicitly in the descent rules (see note 9). Another point that contradicts the use of rules of succession in Hispaniola as rules of descent is that in Mártir de Anglería's version (and in Oviedo's to some degree) a nonrelated chief is included as an inheritor of leadership. If descent rules were the main criteria determining succession, there would have been some other kin relatives (besides the ones stated in the chronicles, for example, parallel cousins) available to inherit the high position.

One major flaw of this interpretation is the assumption that all indigenous groups *must* have been organized in unilineal descent groups. Sued Badillo (1985), for example, claims support for a matriline among the Taíno based upon this feature being present in "Circum-Caribbean" societies from northern Colombia to Venezuela and the Antilles. Statements such as this tend to create generalizations that hide important variability and are based on a static view of kinship systems, which supposedly will never change as long as we are dealing with the same cultural group. Dole's (1991) study on kinship based on several decades of research among lowland South American groups disproves these two perspectives. First, she stresses the immense variability of kinship practices in Amazonia, which includes many diverse and complex descent systems. Different descent systems sometimes are present even among neighboring groups. This variability makes it difficult to produce general groupings of kinship systems. Another interesting point presented in Dole's work is that not all groups have lineal descent in their kinship systems; in other words, other more complex bilineal and bilateral systems are common as well. A third point,

important within the context of this work, is that kinship systems in South American societies can change rapidly according to changes in the social environment. In fact, she states that “it is useful to recognize that behavioral customs (including kinship traditions) may change more rapidly than linguistic symbols” (Dole 1991: 396). Thus, following Dole’s conclusions, it cannot be assumed a priori that (1) kinship systems of all Caribbean prehistoric groups were unilineal, (2) that all Taíno groups had the same descent rules, and (3) that kinship traditions were static. Taíno kinship could have been shaped according to the political and social conditions present in various historical circumstances.

Archaeological data also contradict the basic assumption of lineal descent. As I mentioned above, my research uncovered evidence of a change in Puerto Rican burial customs in the late prehispanic period (Curet and Oliver 1998). The shift from emphasis on cemeteries located in the central clearing of the village (public space) to burials within the context of the domestic unit (private space) may indicate a change from the lineal descent group earlier in prehispanic times to the domestic unit. This shift is concomitant with a change from multifamily households to small houses more appropriate for nuclear families. Based on these patterns Oliver and I (Curet and Oliver 1998: 232) concluded that “corporate (lineal) descent groups either (1) had been entirely abandoned, (2) existed only at an ideological and superficial level reminiscent of the previous egalitarian structure, or (3) were important mostly in elite politics and had little relevance to the life of the population at large.”

The third point in question is the extension of chiefly rules of descent to the rest of the population. We cannot assume that the elite in a stratified society follow the same rules of descent as the rest of the population, or vice versa. Here, again, the elite have to separate themselves from the commoners to control and monopolize the access to resources and status without any kinship obligation. There are many ethnographic examples where transmission of leadership or elites’ rules of descent are different than the ones for the population at large. Chernela (1993), in discussing the kinship and marriage system among the Wanano, explained that most of these rules were followed primarily, if not exclusively, by the higher ranking lineages and not by the lower-status ones. For this reason descent was not taken as seriously by the lower-status groups as it was among the high-ranked ones. Dumont (1992) explains that while descent among the Panare is not emphasized and they tend to be bilateral, the position of the headman is transmitted patrilineally. Finally, Murphy (1974) shows that while the Mundurucú are a matrilocal society, the locality of the chief’s children is patrilocal. If these differences are present in relatively egalitarian societies, or at least in

less complex social organizations, then they probably were more prevalent in chiefdoms.

The fourth and final point in the interpretation of rules of succession is that the versions that emphasize the matriline succession are selected over Fernández de Oviedo's patriline version. Some of the sources explain these discrepancies as evidence of a transition from matrilineal to patrilineal rules of descent, while others claim that the latter version is based on traditions with strong European influence. While both explanations are plausible, they are not well founded when considered within the context of the problems with the first three points discussed above. In other words, these explanations are also based on the assumptions that (1) rules of succession can be equated with rules of descent, (2) chiefly rules of succession can be extended to other sections of society (i.e., commoners), and (3) all Taíno groups were homogeneous in terms of cultural practices with little variability. Although, in general, I tend to agree with these interpretations (i.e., I strongly suspect that Fernández de Oviedo's version might have been referring to rules changed by European influence), I do not think we should discard this interpretation a priori until more evidence is presented. One reason for this is that the first patrilineal option in Fernández de Oviedo's version is followed by several options that do not seem to be of European influence, such as the ones interpreted as bilineal (Helms 1980) or bilateral (Cassá 1974). Furthermore, Fernández de Oviedo's version might have been an *indigenous* reaction to the impact of the encounter, instead of a direct European influence or what Deagan (1998) has called transculturation.

Thus, the archaeological and modern ethnographic records support cultural variability among the ancient residents of the Caribbean and also indicate that descent was not necessarily a simple, unilineal procedure. The contribution of the material record renders obsolete the overly simplistic views of succession applied to all Caribbean societies on the basis of the ethnohistoric record. Because these earlier studies rely almost entirely on a few Spanish descriptions, they lack the well-rounded quality of the ethnographic studies I cited above.

Discussion

In this section I briefly discuss the accounts of the rules of succession by treating them as customary law and not as rules of descent. Due to the dearth of evidence and detail in the European chronicles this section cannot be thorough, extensive, or detailed. For this reason, I decided not to emphasize the specific rules of succession and instead I focused on the inherent variability and flexibility present in the several versions published in

the chronicles. My main argument is that the vagueness present in the rules of succession, which previous researchers saw as contradictions or due to European influence, could have been an integral part of the transmission system of the position of high office among the protohistoric chiefdoms of the Greater Antilles.

Most of the previous interpretations of the rules of succession among Caribbean chiefdoms have concentrated their discussion and interpretations on the “text” while overlooking the “context” of the ethnographic sources (Dumont 1992: 4–5). The former, however, cannot be interpreted without understanding the latter. In emphasizing the text, previous studies on the interpretation of the rules of succession have overlooked two major contextual points present in the chronicles. The first is that previous researchers, following the European chroniclers, tended to consider these rules as being part of an inflexible and strict legal system similar to the patterns of succession that prevailed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Yet, as noted throughout this essay, automatic rules of succession are the exception rather than the norm in most cultures. It is unlikely that European-style rules were present among the Taíno elite or in chiefdoms in general (see note 6). Instead, practices of succession among Caribbean cacicazgos should be considered customary laws based on established principles that were adapted to specific social situations. From this perspective, political considerations were more crucial than kinship, making succession a different process from descent.⁹

The second point I would like to emphasize here is that most of the variability in rules of succession present in the chronicles tends to be ignored or discarded in favor of emphasizing the first option (either the matrilineal or the patrilineal version) as the rule. I suspect that a good part of this variability is real and can provide us with rich information on the dynamics involved in the maintenance of Caribbean chiefdoms. Even if Fernández de Oviedo’s account is discarded because of possible European distortion, the series of options presented by Mártir de Anglería demonstrates the real presence of variability in the Taíno succession system.

When we account for the flexibility and political nature of Caribbean rules of succession within the theoretical context of customary law, the confusion among written accounts is reconciled. The vagueness becomes part of a flexible system in which the advantages of customary laws provide options ensuring that the successor is an appropriate and popular leader. Nevertheless, according to the accounts, succession remains elite-based. In two of the three accounts, only relatives of the chief are considered. The exception is the case described by Mártir de Anglería, in which chiefly descendants are lacking and rulership passes to the most powerful on the

island. Considering that polygyny was common among the Taíno elite and that some of the chiefly families were of considerable size, it is difficult to imagine that this last recourse would have been necessary, unless none of the former chiefs' descendants were fit for leadership.

Evidence for the lack of a strict and universal system of succession in the Caribbean can be observed in the variety of practices found in the few accounts presented in the chronicles on the actual successors of several caciques. In Hispaniola, the cacique Guarionex inherited his position from his father (Cassá 1974: 144) while Caonabo achieved that position for being a "noble man in wars and in times of peace" (Las Casas 1967, 2: 308). Interestingly, after being caught by the Spaniards, Caonabo was succeeded by his brother (Fernández de Oviedo 1959, 1: 56). Cayacoa, cacique of the eastern part of Hispaniola, was succeeded by his wife (Fernández de Oviedo 1959, 1: 61). Behechio, cacique of Xaragua, was followed by his sister Anacaona (Cassá 1974: 144), who possibly was succeeded by her nephew (Fernández de Oviedo 1959, 1: 83). And in Puerto Rico, the cacique Agueibana inherited his position from his brother, who was also called Agueibana (Fernández de Oviedo 1959, 2: 90). Some of these successions, such as sisters or wives inheriting the position of high office, are not included in any of the prescribed procedures.

The flexibility in the succession system also allowed for the election of the best candidate in a situation of crisis. I believe this is what happened in the case of Anacaona, sister of the cacique Behechio and wife of Caonabo, another powerful cacique from the central province of Cibao. Behechio ruled the southwestern province of Xaragua and was the most powerful chief of the island of Hispaniola when colonization started. His interaction with the Spaniards began during Columbus's second voyage when he established a good relationship with the Europeans by willingly paying tribute. In a visit from Columbus's brother, Bartolomé, Behechio and Anacaona established strong diplomatic relationships with the Europeans. Anacaona especially seemed to have developed a friendship with the Spaniards and vice versa. After Behechio's death, Anacaona became the ruler of Xaragua. It is possible that Anacaona was chosen as a *cacica*, or female chief (an option not presented in any of the different accounts on the rules of succession) after Behechio's death because she was the most fit candidate to deal with the political and cultural crisis created by the arrival of the Spaniards to the islands. By this time, the Spanish armies had already destroyed and conquered many other paramount chiefdoms in Hispaniola, including that of Anacaona's husband, Caonabo. The best, and possibly only, viable option for the indigenous polities to survive this crisis was by making alliances with the Europeans. Anacaona, due to her established "friendship"

with the Spaniards, seems to have been the best candidate to deal with this situation. Unfortunately, this did not work since most of her secondary chiefs were massacred, and she was executed shortly after.

The nonspecificity of the rules of succession also could have been used by acting rulers to stabilize their positions within the cacicazgos, especially to avoid internal conflicts between the chief and potential successors or rival factions. As mentioned before, when there is no definite successor determined by “law” and the naming of a candidate is avoided until the death of the chief, competition develops among candidates. In other words, before the reigning chief dies, potential candidates strive for prestige, status, and popularity to enhance their opportunities to succeed to rulership. Within this process, an important mechanism for increasing prestige is to gain favor with the ruling cacique. Such alliances increase the quality and number of the chief’s supporters. As a consequence, stability during the reign of a chief can create a turbulent transition period in which the chief’s allies and other potential candidates vie for positions.

Strong individuals and factions play an important role in the succession process by manipulating the flexibility and vagueness imbedded in the nature of the succession system. Since chiefdoms from the Greater Antilles probably were like many other chiefdoms throughout the world (e.g., Anderson 1994; Comaroff 1978), competition and factionalism must have been more common than the Spanish chronicles imply. The repertoire of rules and ideologies can be manipulated by creating fictive descent or changing the order of successors by demoting legitimate candidates and promoting illegitimate ones.¹⁰ Therefore, instead of specifying a successor, the accession prescriptions (Comaroff 1978) create a field of competitors from which candidates may arise, either by their own efforts or by those of a powerful faction. In my opinion, the contradiction and variability of the different versions of rules of succession for the Caribbean reflect a flexible and vague system that could have been manipulated by either rulers or aspiring inheritors.

In sum, succession in the chiefdoms of the Greater Antilles probably took a range of forms depending on the local social and political situation. Rules of succession probably allowed for a variety of options to ensure the selection of the best candidate and to reduce possible conflict between the chief and the successors. This system combined both ascription and achievement to solve the contradiction of strict succession systems: acquiring good strong government and legitimacy through descent. Smooth, unchallenged succession among the Taíno was not necessarily the norm. Conflict and competition during transitional periods probably prevailed. If anything, we have to agree that the dynamics and internal mecha-

nisms of Caribbean chiefdoms are more complex than current understanding and are far from the extreme simplification presented in the European chronicles. Anthropologists and historians working in the Caribbean need to account for what the chronicles fail to tell us, not only about succession but also about other processes in native political, economic, and religious systems.

Notes

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- 1 The term and concept of Taíno has been the center of some debate among Caribbeanists. Veloz Maggiolo (1983) presents a more restricted definition of the term *Taíno* and a criticism of the loose usage of the term, while Moscoso (1986) expands the meaning of the term to include cultural groups of previous periods. Most Caribbeanists, following Veloz Maggiolo, would tend to agree in principle that this term encompasses a wide variety of cultural or ethnic groups who, in the eyes of the Europeans, looked very similar.
- 2 I have to admit that some of my critiques on the misuses of the chronicles might sound obvious and basic to most ethnohistorians. However, as basic as they may be, these mistakes are common among Caribbean archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and even ethnohistorians. Unfortunately, these misleading arguments have been perpetuated by their continuous repetition without verification.
- 3 The discussion presented in this section is based on works by Goody (1966), Hamnett (1975), Burling (1974), and Comaroff (1978).
- 4 In fact, this is true for many, if not most, complex societies around the world. See Goody 1966 and Hamnett 1975 for more examples and detailed discussion.
- 5 This passage is not clear since it can be read as the chief's son or the chief's brother's sons inheriting the office. Moscoso (1986: 390) used this last reading. However, in terms of this work it does not matter which one is chosen since both of them can be considered patrilineal forms of inheritance.
- 6 Carneiro (1991), for example, in a study of the chiefdoms of the Cauca Valley in Colombia, argues that chiefdoms, contrary to state-level societies, do not have legal systems but customary laws. He uses this difference as a criterion to distinguish between these two types of sociopolitical organization.
- 7 Alcina Franch and Galán Mayo (1990) have also suggested this possibility.
- 8 In my opinion the lack of recognition of cultural and social variability among and within islands is one of the major interpretive problems of Caribbean archaeology. An extreme example of this position is a statement published by Siegel (1999: 220): "It is very likely that the political, social, and symbolic significance of the ball courts and ceremonial plazas was the same for the two islands. The polities on Hispaniola and Puerto Rico may have varied in size, but

they were present on both islands. In my opinion, placing too much of a distinction between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico in Taíno sociopolitics inappropriately imposes modern geopolitics onto the prehistoric context.” This type of perspective ignores major cultural differentiations present in both the ethnohistoric and archaeological record and limits our analysis of Caribbean ancient societies. See McGinnis 2001 and Wilson 1993, 2001a, 2001b for further arguments about diversity among the indigenous groups of the Greater Antilles.

- 9 It is recognized here that kinship rules can be concrete and general, too, in the sense that they can be adapted to the specific social conditions based on a set of established principles. Examples of this are fictive relatives and the “distortion” of some kinship rules to accommodate some marriages that normally would be considered against the incest taboo. However, what differs in the application of descent and succession rules are not the sets of principles but the application of them. As I see it, if the rules recorded by the Spaniards were actual descent rules; they should have been the principles and not the variability in the application. In other words, although in practice kinship relationships can be flexible and molded according to the social situation, the ideal rules (i.e., principles) normally do not present more than one option. If this is the case, then these “principles” have a contradiction in the rules of descent since matrilineal, patrilineal, and nonrelatives are included as options for descent. This type of contradiction is not normally present in “standard” or ideal kinship systems.
- 10 Comaroff (1978) presents an African case where the order of successors or kinship ties was changed to depose nonpopular incumbents or to bring to power an “illegitimate” candidate of a powerful faction.

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