



The Taínos of Kiskeya

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Water was not an obstacle to the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean—it was their expressway.

They had a highly developed level of technology for the construction and navigation of canoes—some of their canoes were so big that they held up to 100 people plus their products for trade.


When did indigenous peoples begin to populate the island of Kiskeya?



The first indigenous people arrived 6,000 years before Christ was born...

That's more than 8,000 years ago!

Where did they come from?

A photograph of a dense, lush green forest. In the foreground, a single, tall, slender tree stands prominently, its trunk dark and its canopy green. The background is filled with a thick canopy of various green trees, extending to a hazy horizon under a bright, overcast sky. The overall scene is a vibrant, natural landscape.

Do you think that indigenous peoples learned *un chin* about this island in 7,500 years? About its plants and trees, its insects and animals, where to get drinking water, the best fishing spots, about its seasons and its storms?

All the indigenous peoples of the island were Stone Aged peoples, which does not mean they were primitive, it only means they did not smelt metal, but instead made all their tools of stone, bone, wood, and other natural materials.



The word *cibao* means “stony” in Taíno—stones of all kinds were important, necessary to Stone Aged people. The Cibao Valley was an important source of stones and gold.

What does “taíno” mean?



What do you think this artifact is? ...What was it used for?

Through vocabulary that has been passed down through the historical chronicles, original documents, and Dominican Spanish, as well as through anthropological and archaeological research, we know that there were a minimum of 7 different groups of indigenous peoples on Kiskeya when Europeans arrived in 1492. (Now linguists can no longer argue over which is the correct indigenous name for the island—Kiskeya, Haití or Bohío. All three names are correct, but in different indigenous languages.)

The largest group and the one with the most advanced techniques in agriculture and ceramics, as well as the most advanced religious practices, was the Taíno nation. Their language was understood by all the region's indigenous peoples. Because of all of this, Spaniards called all the indigenous peoples of the region Taínos... and we usually still do so.

Until recently, some specialists used the term “Island Arawaks” for the Taíno, but Dr. Irving Rouse, an archaeologist from Puerto Rico, corrected us, pointing out that “arawak” was the base of their language, not the name they used to refer to themselves as a people.

The Taíno Food Base

- Casabe (from bitter yucca/*yuka*)
- Bread made of corn (*arepas*)
- Boiled corn (*maiz*) & beans
- Squash (*auyama*)
- Peanuts (*maní*)
- Sweet yucca & other tubers (*ñames, yautía, lerenes, etc.*)
- Hot peppers (*ajies*) & *Ajiaco*
- Sea turtles, conch, & other seafoods
- Fish of all kinds
- Manatees (only for nobles)
- Birds of all kinds & their eggs
- *Hutías* & *solenodontes*
- Iguanas & snakes
- Lots of fruit (but no citrus fruits)
- Juices & *mabí*



What were the Taíno gardens called?

Do you know any of their techniques for fishing & hunting?

How did they preserve their meats and fish?

- The cuisine of the indigenous peoples of Kiskeya was very healthy—it had lots of calories, protein, minerals, and vitamins, but very little fat. It could support a very large population.
- New archaeological and demographic research shows that the original indigenous population when Europeans arrived was several million people—probably 4 to 6 million--not a couple hundred thousand people like some of the Spanish chroniclers wrote.



- Based on their principal carbohydrate, *yuka*, the Taínos' population centers were called *yukayekes*.
- Some *yukayekes* were home to between 5,000 up to 10,000 people—at a time when Paris and London had far fewer inhabitants and Madrid did not yet exist.
- The region most developed by the Taínos was called Xaragua, which belongs to the Republic of Haiti today—it was the *kacikazgo* (chiefdom) of a supreme *kacike* (chief) named Behecchio. The city of Puerto Principe was built over the ruins of Xaragua.



This pictograph in Cueva Pomiers might represent the 5 supreme *kacikes*.

Kazikazgos



- Each *yukayeke* had its own *kacike* (chief), and the physical extent of his power was his *kazikazgo* (chiefdom—similar to today's provinces).
- The *kacikes* of the smaller *yukayekes* had to obey more powerful *kacikes*—there was a pyramid of power, with only a few at the top.
- In 1492, there were 5 supreme *kacikes* on the island—they were super powerful. You can't really draw lines showing their *kazikazgos* because the extent of their power was always changing, dependent upon the political alliances that they made, marriages among the noble families, and other agreements. But we know where their principal *yucakekes* were—see map above.

Kacikes vs. Behikes



Kacikes were the leaders in charge of deciding when to plant, harvest, hunt, fish... and how to divide the bounty among their people. They consulted with their *cemíes* (guardian spirits or gods) to seek advice for the wellbeing of the people of their *kacikazgo*; they had the seat of honor in the equivalent to bleachers when the people played *batey*, their cherished ballgame (more about *cemíes* and *bateyes* in a few moments).

Behikes were the leaders in charge of curing the sick. They were also the “umpires” for the *batey* ballgames and the teachers of those young people who might one day inherit the position of *kacike*. Behikes consulted with their own *cemíes*, seeking advice for the wellbeing of their people—but mostly they did so within sacred caves, which were considered to be doors between this world and the world of the *cemíes* and *upias* (the spirits of the dead).

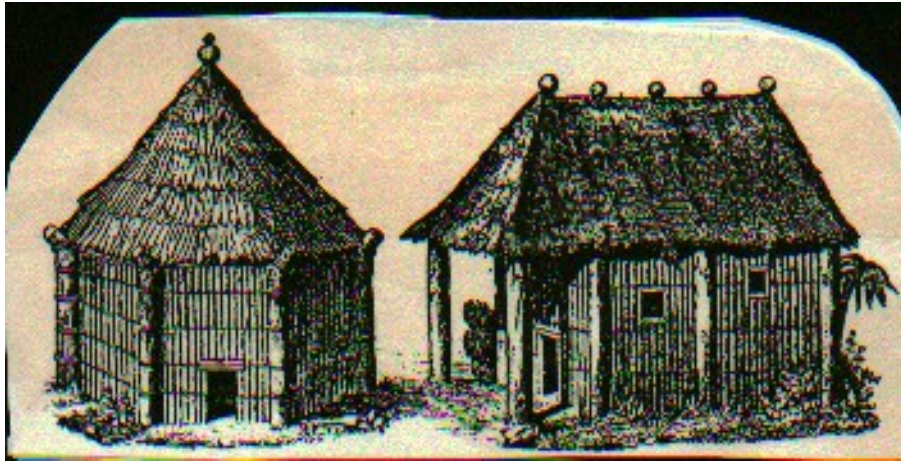


Like the sun and the moon, the Taíno needed the powers of both their leaders.

Equality—more or less

- The chroniclers wrote that the Taíno had no concept of “mine,” not even a word to indicate possession. Everything was owned in common.
- They wrote that there were two social classes among the Taíno, *nitaínos* (nobles) and *naborías* (workers), but they only noted two differences: *nitaínos* ate casabe and slept in hammocks, *naborías* ate corn bread and slept on woven mats laid on the ground.
- The *kacikes* and *behikes* sat on *dujos* (short chairs--all the others on woven mats), wore ceremonial clothing and special symbols, and were buried in a special way with food, tools, and other objects showing their power.... A *kacike*'s favorite wife might be buried alive with his body to accompany him into the afterworld!
- Both males and females worked together to prepare and plant their *conucos*, although it was mostly the women who tended the *conucos* (children of both sexes “worked” scaring birds away from the growing plants), and mostly women who prepared the food and made ceramics. Men did most of the fishing and hunting, together with their pet dogs. And only men could seek gold (and then only after abstaining from making love for an entire lunar month).
- There were female *behikes* before the arrival of the Spaniards, but we don't know for sure if there were *kacikas* (female chiefs).





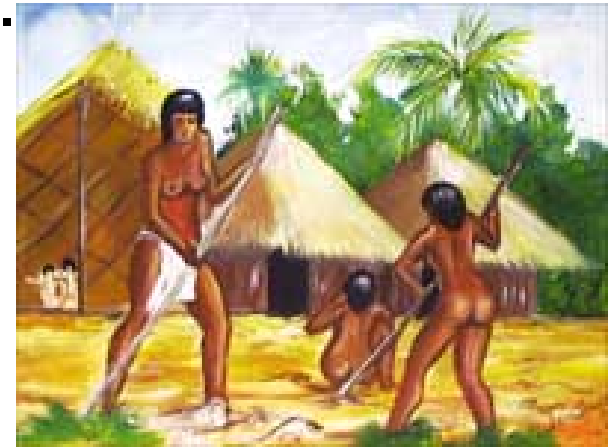
Taíno homes

Drawing by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdez.

- Most Taínos lived in *bohíos*, round houses with cone-shaped roofs, made of poles and woven plant fibers. Inside, they had what looked like “tapestries” to the Spaniards, woven from natural plant fibers in many different colors, plus decorated gourds for storage, and hammocks that they strung up from the center pole to side poles at bedtime.
- The *kacikes*, with their multiple wives and children, however, lived in *caneyes*, rectangular houses with covered verandas where the *kacike* and other male nobles took their *cojoba* (more about *cojoba* in a few moments). The *caneyes* faced the *batey*, which was both the *yucayeke*’s ball court and main plaza.
- The Spanish chroniclers wrote that “there was no order at all” among the Taíno houses, but they did, indeed, have a kind of order—the *kacike*’s close relatives built their *bohíos* close to his *caney*, while less closely related relatives lived further away. Thus, instead of straight streets and squares like European towns, the shape of a Taíno *yucayeke* and its passageways was more circular.

Relations between single and married Taínos

- Before marriage, there were no prohibitions against sexual relationships among the Taíno except that it was forbidden to make love with parents, aunts and uncles, or brothers and sisters. If a baby resulted, it was considered to be a gift from the gods for the mother's family.
- In fact, the *kacike*, with his people's approval, "loaned" unmarried girls to important male visitors. If a baby resulted, it was considered to be a very special gift and improved bloodlines.
- After marriage, however, a woman wore a cloth called a *nagua* to indicate that now she belonged to just one man, her husband.



More about Taíno relationships

- All inheritances passed through the maternal line (the females).
- All of a woman's children lived with her, her mother, her maternal grandmother (if still alive), all of the woman's brothers and sisters, and her sisters' children. (Her husband, her sisters' husbands, and her brothers' children lived with their mothers and their families.)
- The terms *aunt*, *uncle*, and *cousin* did not exist in Taíno. You would say *father* to all of your mother's brothers and *mother* to all of your mother's sisters (they lived in the same house with you), and they all had parental responsibility for you. All of your mother's other children, plus her sisters' children (who all lived in the same house with you) were your *brothers* and *sisters*.

This confused the Spaniards, who insisted on their own terms for relatives—from this came the concept of “*primos-hermanos*.”

- Besides birth and marriage, there was another way for Taínos to gain relatives--***guaitiao***. *Guaitiao* was a rite wherein you interchanged names and mutual obligations, the same as the obligations that existed among other relatives.

Potizas, to hold beverages, were popular gifts for newly married couples.





What were the indigenous peoples of Kiskeya like?

- "Color of a lion"
- Dark, almond-shaped eyes
- High cheekbones
- Generally happy
- Smiles predominant
- Intelligent
- Lovers of music, dance, and art
- Straight black hair
- Short but with well formed bodies
- Healthy and fit
- Generous
- Creative
- Religious



Conceptions of beauty vary from one society to another, from one age to another



To the Taínos, an important beauty feature (which also indicated nobility) was a sharply sloped forehead.

The mother of a *nitaíno/a* used cotton bandages to wrap a smooth piece of wood or bone tightly around her baby's forehead and thus mold his or her soft skull bones into the desired shape.

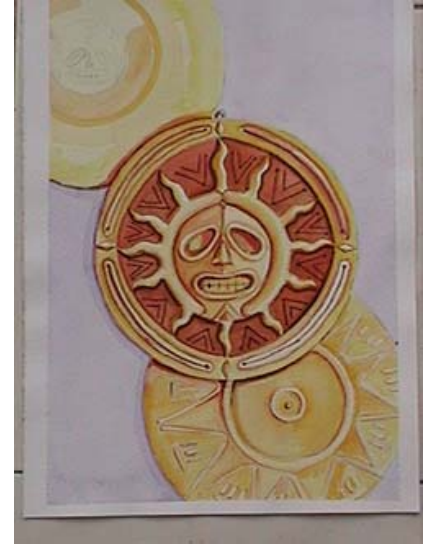
Males and females alike cut their hair straight across the forehead to behind the ears, leaving it long in back. And both used earrings and "makeup" in colors including black, red, and white.

How Taínos dressed (or not)



Kacike's belt
(Afro-Taíno)

A guanín
by Joel
Villalona.



- Cristobal Columbus wrote that the Taínos walked about “naked as the day they were born,” but he was wrong. “To be dressed” is a very European concept.
- Taínos were “dressed” as long as they wore their armbands and legbands. Married women wore *naguas* of finely woven cotton, not “to cover their shameful parts” like some chroniclers wrote, but only to show that they were married—and the more noble the woman, the longer her *nagua*. For ceremonial occasions, everyone wore a small sculpture of their favorite *cemí* hung across their foreheads on bands of woven cotton and gold (they greeted each other by touching the forehead) and they painted symbols on their faces, chests, arms, etc. For *areitos* (song and dance celebrations) they also wore strings of shells around their ankles, that tinkled as they walked and danced.
- For ceremonial occasions, *kacikes* wore elaborate white cotton capes embroidered with symbols of their *cemís* in fine gold thread, colorful beads, and feathers, a cotton crown decorated with golden thread and feathers, a cotton belt decorated with beautiful beads and a “buckle” in the form of an elaborately decorated face, often gilded in gold, as well as a *guanín*—a medallion made of a brilliant metal that was an amalgam of gold, silver, and copper (imported from today’s Yucatán).
- *Behikes* wore black cotton capes and black tatoos that symbolized their *cemís*.

Cemís

- Christians do not adore crosses or crucifixes—only what they represent. In the same way, Taínos did not adore the statues and figures of their *cemís*, but only what they represented, their spiritual guides. They made symbolic figures of their *cemís* out of bone, teeth, shell, stone, wood... often with gold decorations. Some figures were very large and others were miniatures. Some were to put on “altars,” some were woven into baskets or carved onto gourds, others were worn as jewelry.
- Every Taíno at every level of society had at least one personal *cemí*. *Kacikes* and *behikes* had many, which is what gave them their power.
- The *kacike* had an “altar” on the veranda of his *caney* where he kept his *cemí* figures. They helped him make decisions for the wellbeing of the people of his *yucayeke*.
- The most powerful of all the Taíno *cemís* was Yokahu Vagua Maorocoti, “god” of yucca and of the sea. His mother was Atabeyra, “goddess” of the sea and the moon. Yokahu’s form is like the yucca root. Archeologists call it a “trigonolito.”
- There were many, many *cemís*. Fray Ramón Pané wrote about some in a report that Columbus ordered him to research at the end of the 15th century. Many say he was the world’s first anthropologist.



A trigonolito.



The *cemís* lived in Coaybay, the Taíno heaven, which had its own *kacike*, Maketauri Guayava.

They walked the earth at night as *upias*, indistinguishable from *goeiz* (human beings), with one important exception. Can you guess what it was?



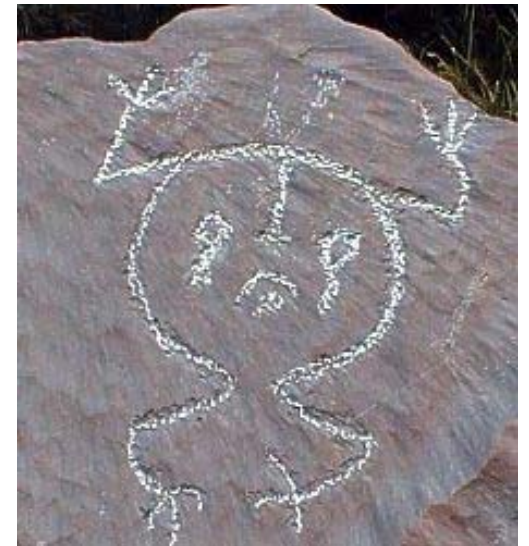
Opiyelguoberán.

Atabeyra
(Puerto Rico).



Guabancex, “goddess”
of hurricanes.

Marocael, guardian
of the sacred caves.



Boiyanel, the rain “god.”

The *cojoba* ceremony

- *Kacikes* and *behikes* communicated with their *cemís* during an hallucinogenic trance. First, they fasted (6-8 days in the case of a *kacike*, much longer for a *behike*), drinking only tea made of an herb called *digo* and bathing daily with *digo*, and finally they ritually vomited using ceremonial “spatulas” to get rid of any last vestiges of impurities remaining in their bodies. Reclining on a *dujo*, they inhaled a powder called *cojoba*, a mixture of the seeds of *Anadenanthera peregrina* or *Piptadenia peregrina* (“false tamarind”), green tobacco, and shell (the calcium from the shell acted as a catalyst so the drug took effect faster).
- “The world turned upside down” the moment they inhaled the *cojoba* and “they began to walk on the sky.”
- Awakening from their trance, they revealed the advice they received from their *cemís*.



Tamarindo falso.



Ceremonial vomiting spatula



Pictograph of a man taking *cojoba*, Cueva Pomiers.



A dujo.

Areítos

- To celebrate good news from the *cemís*, a good harvest, a visit from someone important, the birth of a baby *nitaíno*, a marriage, or just for fun or bonding among his people, a *kacike* might call for an *areíto*, where everybody danced and sang together in the *batey* (their main plaza).
- Their musical instruments were *mayohuacanes* (drums), *fotutos*, *güiras*, flutes, whistles, and maracas.
- They told their histories through song—their *kacikes'* successes, their heroic myths and legends, and songs in taught to them by their *cemís*.
- The most valuable gift one Taíno could give another was a song!



The game of *batey* or *batú*

- By its name “*batey*,” we know that the principal purpose of the *batey* (plaza) was not for *areítos*, but for the *bateyes*, the Taínos’ ball games.
- The “umpire” of the *batey* was the *behike* and the games was played by teams of men against men, women against women, and mixed teams.
- *Batey* was a sport, but also a religious ritual and served as the Taínos’ court of justice.



Molds for the belts and balls used in *bateyes*. Europeans saw rubber for the first time during a Taíno *batey*.

Taíno religion in daily life



The Taínos' religious beliefs were woven, sculpted, and stamped into all the items that they used in their daily lives, literally—in the designs that adorned their baskets, gourds, mats, tapestries, tools, ceramics, jewelry, clothing... even their own bodies in the form of paintings and tatoos.



The importance of the head to a Taíno

- Apparently, the Taíno believed that the essence of a human was located inside one's head.
- They adorned their foreheads with figures of their favorite *cemís* and greeted one another by touching each other's foreheads.
- They made many figures of heads and often buried their dead without heads, keeping the skulls of their dear departed ones in beautiful baskets or other special containers that they kept close inside their *bohíos*.


This woven cotton doll contains a real human skull inside.



They sculpted and drew many heads on the stones around the island—like the ones called “Las Caritas” near the entrance to Los Cabritos National Park (Lago Enriquillo)—and inside sacred caves.

¡They were the first HAPPY FACES in the world!



A tropical beach scene with palm trees and a blue sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

It makes me very happy to announce that the extinction of the Taínos is a myth. Their original population was drastically reduced, but they were never wiped out. For the past 20 years, as an historian and anthropologist (with two BA's, a Master's and a Ph.D. from the U.S.), I have worked to re-analyze the documents and chronicles from the Encounter Era. There is tons of evidence of their survival, not just documentary but also archeological, ethno-historical, and biological.

The results of recent mtDNA research by the Puerto Rican Dr. Juan Carlos Martínez Cruzado, working with a National Science Foundation Grant and a team of specialists from the Universidad Central del Este (San Pedro de Macorix) has proven that 15-18% of Dominicans have indigenous mtDNA. That's one out of five, and if we could afford a complete DNA analysis, the results would be even higher.

As Dominicans you are the descendants not just of Spaniards, but also of indigenous peoples and African peoples—Dominicans are a mixed-race with the best characteristics of three very noble roots.