

Zemís, trees, and symbolic landscapes: three Taíno carvings from Jamaica

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Three carved wooden images have come to light in Jamaica, the most important find of Taíno carvings for two centuries from that island. Their discovery prompts a reconsideration of Taíno zemís, and their placing into the known context of the Caribbean region, with its South American links.

Taíno zemís

In 1495, during his second voyage to the Caribbean, Christopher Columbus was one of a handful of Europeans to observe a religious rite of the indigenous Taíno (Arawak) inhabitants of Hispaniola (Bourne 1906: 171–2; Columbus [1969]: 192). Central to this ritual was the role of wooden 'idols', *zemís*, which the Taíno appeared to worship, and which the Spanish regarded as evidence of pagan idolatry (Columbus [1969]: 154). Wooden image-*zemís* have been found throughout the Greater Antilles, notably in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba (Fewkes 1907: 197–202; Lovén 1935: 598–602).

In 1792, three figures carved of a dark polished wood were discovered in a cave in the Carpenter's Mountains of southern Jamaica (Anon. 1803; 1896; Joyce 1907: 402–7; Lester 1958). In 1992, three further wooden objects came to light, said to have been discovered originally in a cave in north-central Jamaica (Aarons 1994; Weintraub 1993).

This new discovery, a major find of Taíno wooden carvings, is the most important in Jamaica for 200 years.¹ In studying these new

images we realized they afforded an opportunity to re-examine the issue of wooden *zemís* in Taíno religion, rather than simply 'fit' the pieces into the accepted hierarchy of putative Taíno deities which themselves are known imperfectly from a fragmentary and often ambiguous ethnohistorical record; they had a more complex symbolic importance. Here we consider these new discoveries as well as the generality of wooden *zemís* from the perspective of their material — wood, the trees from which the wood came, and the conceptual association of the objects with the animated landscape of Taíno world-view.

The new discoveries

In June 1992, the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT) heard that three Taíno wooden images had been discovered near the small village of Aboukir in the northern central highlands. The images, apparently discovered originally during the 1940s in a near-by cave, had subsequently been returned. They allegedly remained in the cave until 1972 when they were once again removed, this time by a Mr Clayton, and kept in

1 There has been some confusion about the number and location of Taíno wooden objects from Jamaica. To the three pieces from the Carpenter's Mountains can be added the figure of a bird on the back of a turtle- or tortoise-back in the British Museum (Joyce 1907: 406, plate LI, figure 2), an anthropomorphic seated figure currently in the Museum of Primitive Art, New York (Arrom 1985: figures 43 & 44), and a *duho* found by C.B. Lewis at the site of Cambridge Hill (Howard 1956: 56). Aarons (1994: 15) reports a 12-inch high wooden 'doll' figure found in a shallow cave in

front of the gate at the New Seville Great House Estate which disappeared some 50 years ago. Including the three new discoveries, possibly 10 wooden Jamaican Taíno objects/*zemís* are known. A small anthropomorphic figurine in the British Museum (Register No. Am, St. 332) may also be from Jamaica. Although labelled by Arrom (1989: figure 48) as coming from Haiti or the Dominican Republic its British Museum record shows no definite provenience, and it is stylistically similar to the figure from the Carpenter's Mountains.

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FIGURE 1. Anthropomorphic figure from Aboukir (detail), possibly representing the Taíno deity *Baibrama*. Note traces of white around face and mouth and eye sockets which originally held inlay.

his house for 20 years. These events, and the circumstances which led to the images finally coming to the attention of the JNHT, appear to have been associated with *obeah*, Jamaican voodoo (Abrahams & Szwed 1983; Schuler 1979). The three objects, acquired by the JNHT in September 1992, are currently on display in the National Gallery (1994) in Kingston.

Each object is of a different type — an anthropomorphic figure, a bird and a small ‘utili-

tarian’ spoon-like object with an anthropomorphic handle. On the basis of photographs, Arrom & Rouse (1992), seeing the aged and cracked nature of the wood, judged them authentic.

The anthropomorphic figure (FIGURES 1 & 2) is 168.4 cm in height with a maximum width of 28 cm. The form of the bent legs suggests the presence of ligatures — a practice well known amongst the Taíno in general, and documented for the Jamaican Taíno by Columbus ([1969]: 196). It has prominent male genitals, and thin arms with hands reclining on the chest. Arrom & Rouse (1992) consider these features characteristic of Taíno representations of *Baibrama*, the deity identified with the cultivation and consumption of cassava (Arrom 1989: 68–73), and not to be confused with *Yúcahu*, the supreme Taíno deity, whose name means ‘spirit of cassava’ (Arrom 1989: 17–20). The eye-sockets, ears and mouth would probably originally have held inlay, possibly shell, but conceivably gold or *guanín*, a copper–gold alloy.

According to Arrom & Rouse (1992), the projection at the top of the figure may have supported a table or ‘canopy’ (see below), and the pole upon which the figure is perched may have served as a support, replacing the circular base upon which such figures normally stand. Aarons (1994: 17) regards this figure more speculatively as the ceremonial ‘staff of office’ of a paramount *cacique* (chief). According to Lewis (1994: I), the colour and texture of the wood, as well as the presence of insect bore-holes and possible trunk thorns, strongly suggests the *Ceiba* or silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*).

The bird figure (FIGURES 3 & 4) is 61 cm in height with a maximum width of 28 cm. Thought by Arrom & Rouse (1992) to represent an aquatic species, possibly a pelican, it recalls a similar avian image in the British Museum (FIGURE 5) (Joyce 1907: 406, plate LI, figure 2; Rouse 1992: 117, figure 29f). However, a comparison of the two images shows possibly significant differences in style, structure, and type of wood. Arrom & Rouse (1992) also note that the circular table or ‘canopy’ projecting from the back of the bird image is associated with the ‘*cohoba* ceremony’ (see below). On the basis of colour and grain pattern, Lewis (1994: I) identified three kinds of wood from which this figure could have been made — ‘West Indian Ma-

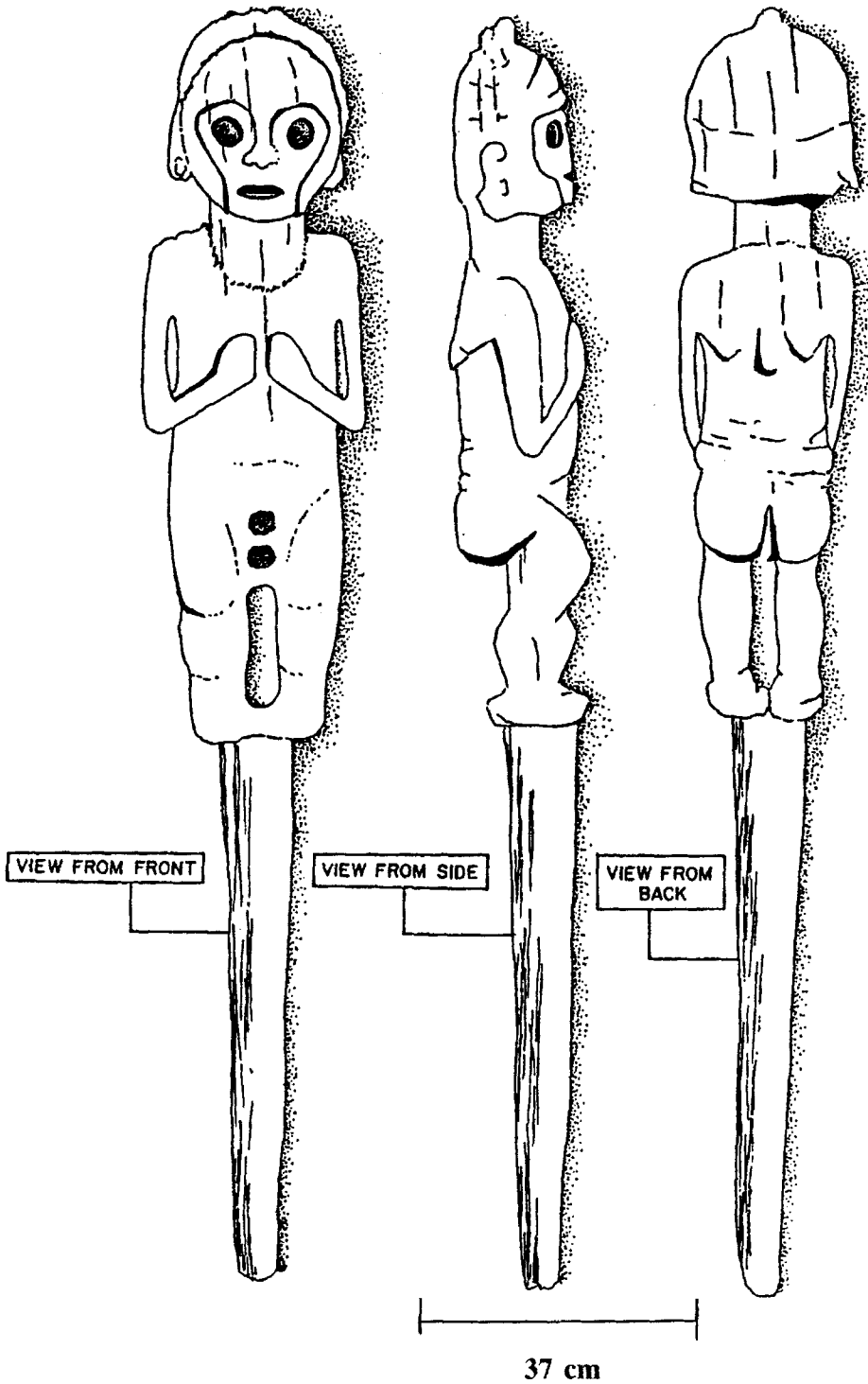


FIGURE 2. Anthropomorphic figure from Aboukir. Figure is 168.4 cm in height, 28 cm maximum width. The Jamaica National Heritage Trust (Archaeology Division) Rec.29.9.1992. Illustrated by T. Lindsay. Scale 1: 4.

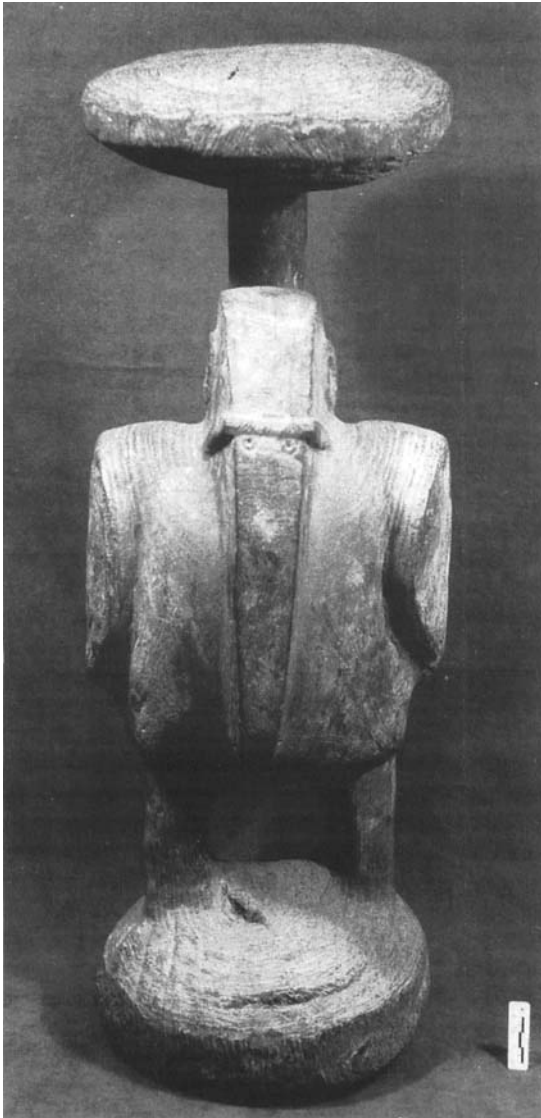


FIGURE 3. *Bird figure from Aboukir (frontal view), with circular table possibly used for snuffing hallucinogenic cohoba powder.*

hogany' (*Swietenia mahogoni*), 'West Indian Cedar' (*Cedrela odorata*), and 'Santa Maria' (*Calophyllum calaba*).

The third and smallest object (FIGURES 6 & 7) appears to be half of a container used for ritual purposes (Arrom & Rouse 1992) — possibly a ladle or spoon. It is 15.9 cm in height and 7.7 cm in maximum width. The handle is in the shape of a 'human' head, and the eyes, mouth and possibly ears may originally have

been inlaid. Arrom & Rouse (1992), considering that the minimal details preclude an exact identification, tentatively suggest it might be Maquetaurie Guayaba, the Taíno Lord of the Underworld (Arrom 1989: 54–5). Again on the basis of wood colour and grain, Lewis (1994: II) identified this object as being made probably from either *Hibiscus tiliaceus* or *Hibiscus elatus*.

The context of sacredness

Taíno wooden *zemís*, like any sacred objects, exist within social and spatial contexts — overlapping spheres of symbolic and ritual activity. What conferred their sacredness was a combination of form, material, production process, use, and the ascription of specific cultural values to each of these. It is these values which we wish to explore as they exemplify the way in which the Taíno conceptualized and classified their phenomenological universe, and situated themselves within it.

The shape of Taíno world-view reveals a distinctively Caribbean Amerindian way of creating and maintaining what Kus (1983: 278) has called a 'meaningful universe'. The spiritual significance of wooden *zemís*, native fauna and flora and the meteorological phenomena which enveloped them, is a product of the architecture of Taíno symbolic reasoning and religious thought. The ethnographic, ethno-historical and archaeological evidence show that Taíno views of the natural world shared much in common with lowland Amazonian societies — particularly in recognizing as animate aspects of the physical world which western science classifies as inanimate (e.g. Eliade 1974: 47–8; Hallowell 1960: 54; Lévi-Strauss 1969: 184–5; Ruggles & Saunders 1993: 1–31). The richness of Amazonian ethnography, compared to Caribbean ethnohistory, is such that it can throw light on Taíno beliefs and broaden the scope of investigation into the nature of wooden *zemís* (and see Roe 1995).

Zemís and the Taíno spirit world

The Taíno, like other Amerindian peoples of Central and South America, viewed the world as animated by spiritual forces and articulated by myth (Alegría 1986; López-Baralt 1985). Spirits resided in every feature of nature. The propitiation and manipulation of these omnipresent, powerful but ambivalent spirits made

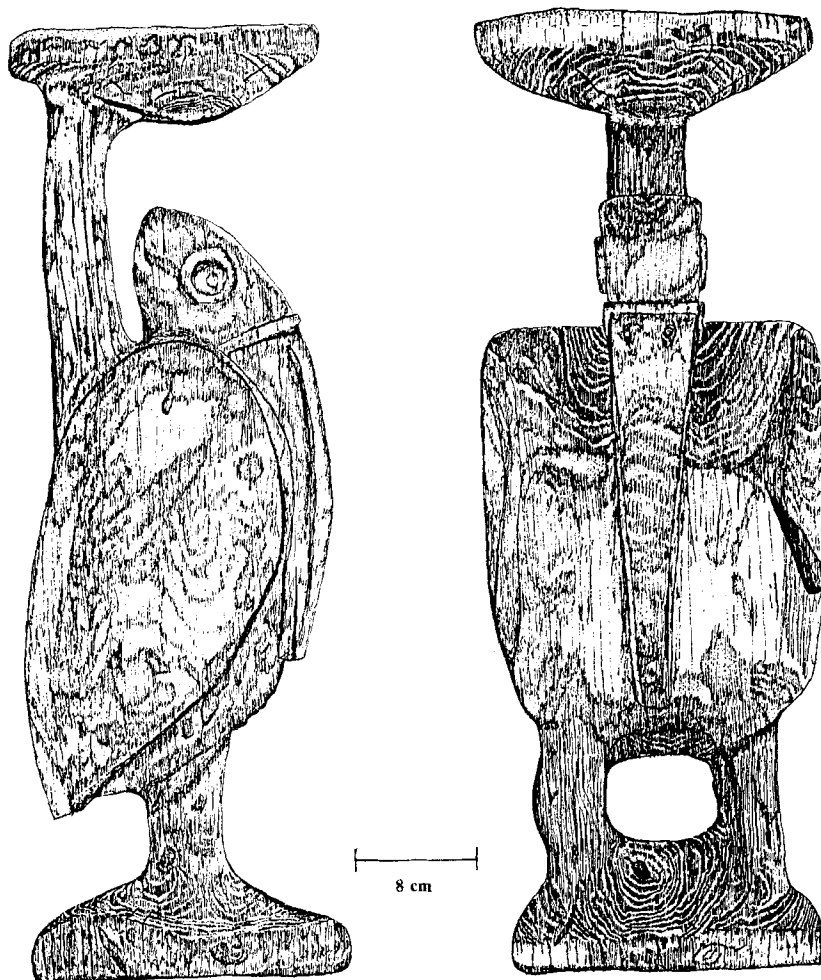


FIGURE 4. Bird figure from Aboukir. Height is 61 cm, maximum width 28 cm. Jamaica National Heritage Trust (Archaeology Division) Rec.1.10.92. Illustrated by B. Callum. Scale 1:2.26.

social life possible. In this sense, Taíno worldview was fundamentally shamanic; ethno-historical sources show that shamans were active in their society, particularly in curing (D'Anghera 1970: 172–3; Lovén 1935: 575–8; Rouse 1948: 537–8).

Whilst the Taíno shared characteristic traits of lowland Amazonian shamanism, one feature appears unique — the practice of *zemí* worship. According to Lovén (1935: 583), the origins of 'zemiism' lay in ancestor worship, and Fewkes (1907: 54) finds the term *zemí* applied by the Taíno to anything which possessed 'magic power'.

Whilst *zemís* have been recognized as formal deities, such as Yúcahu, the supreme god (Arrom 1989: 17–30; Rouse 1992: 13, 118), and Atabey his mother, goddess of human fertility (Arrom 1989: 31–6; Rouse 1992: 13), they have

also been regarded as spiritual forces residing in trees, rocks, caves and other features of the landscape. Apart from wooden images, the term *zemí* has been applied also to artefacts of different forms and sizes made from stone, shell, pottery, cotton and human bones (Fewkes 1907: 53–4; Lovén 1935: 585–6, 591, 597–620; Rouse 1992: 13; Vega 1987).

It is clear that *zemí* is a widely used but analytically imprecise term. This is due partly to the relative poverty and ambiguity of the ethno-historical record, and partly to the favoured ascription of the term to one kind of artefact — the distinctive 'three-pointed stone' (e.g. Fewkes 1907: 111–33; Lovén 1935: 628–33). This imprecision, and the corresponding practice of labelling many disparate items as *zemís*, may obscure meaningful Taíno discriminations between gods, spirits, ancestors, forces resident



FIGURE 5. Carved wooden zemí of a bird standing on the back of a turtle or tortoise, probably from Jamaica. Note eye socket for inlay, and damaged column upon which originally was a circular table, probably for cohoba snuffing. Figure is 66.5 cm in height. (Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.)

within the landscape, and the kinds of material (in this case varieties of wood), from which zemís were made. Whilst zemís could have been perceived as ubiquitous links between the natural and supernatural worlds (Stevens-Arroyo

1988: 59), it is unclear to what extent any hierarchy of sacredness or spiritual power existed, although some zemís were more esteemed than others (Stevens-Arroyo 1988: 62). For the Taíno, zemí was spirit, not object.

The 'social life' of zemís also is problematical. In Amazonia it is shamans who possess tool kits of magical objects, including wooden images, to contact the spirit world (e.g. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961; 1975: 46); amongst the Taíno, it appears, every person possessed at least one zemí, with some individuals owning possibly as many as 10 (Rouse 1948: 535; 1992: 13). It is probable that owning certain types or categories of zemís was a privilege of the caciques (Columbus [1969]: 192), a view inferred by Rouse (1948: 536), with reference to the chiefs depending for their power and status on the superiority of their zemís.

Supporting this view is the fact that representations of zemís (as spirits or 'gods') occur as decoration on religious paraphernalia including the élite *duho* stools (FIGURE 8) (Rouse 1992: 121). Another possibility is that an older tradition of lineage-based zemí ancestor images was developing into a situation where *caciques* were vying for status through the manipulation of their zemís — a case perhaps of incipient stratification, which may, in turn, have been leading to the appearance of formal deities.

Kept in niches or on tables within their dwellings, and sometimes in separate structures (Lovén 1935: 598), zemís could be inherited, traded, given away or even stolen (Rouse 1992: 13). The possible pre-eminence of wooden zemís over other kinds is suggested by references to a category of hollow 'speaking zemís' which appeared to have had an oracular function. These were regarded by the Spanish as a method for hoodwinking the gullible by ventriloquy with a shaman speaking through a tube (Bourne 1907: 312; Lovén 1935: 599–600). If wooden zemís were the most spiritually important it is possible that some stone zemís imitated wooden originals (Lovén 1935: 603; Stevens-Arroyo 1988: 58).

As Wilson (1990: 88) notes, zemís were less a symbolization of a *cacique's* power than his supernatural allies, to be venerated, respected and consulted. The role of the manipulation of wooden image-zemís in articulating shamanic links between the physical world and the spirit realm is seen in the important *cohoba* ceremony.

By snuffing the hallucinogenic *cohoba* powder,² Taíno *caciques* and shamans (*bohito*) communed with the spirit world (Bourne 1906: 327; D'Anghera 1970: 174), particularly, it appears, with ancestor spirits resident within trees and wooden *zemís*, an association suggested by the arboreal nature of *cohoba*. It was snuffed through polished wood or cane tubes (Kerchache 1994: 85) from a round wooden table, an integral part of the class of wooden *zemí* figure (e.g. Joyce 1907: 403; Lovén 1935: 599) to which the bird

2 After much confusion concerning botanical identification, it is now recognized that *cohoba* was hallucinogenic snuff made from the ground seeds of *Anadenanthera peregrina* (Naxon 1993: 178; Wilbert 1987: 17–18), a mimosa-like tree, closely related to *A. colubrina*, the source of the sacred *huilca* snuff used in western South America (Gollán & Gordillo 1994; Wassén 1967).

FIGURE 6. *Small ladle/ spoon with anthropomorphic handle from Aboukir. Note high polish and eye and mouth sockets which originally held inlay.*

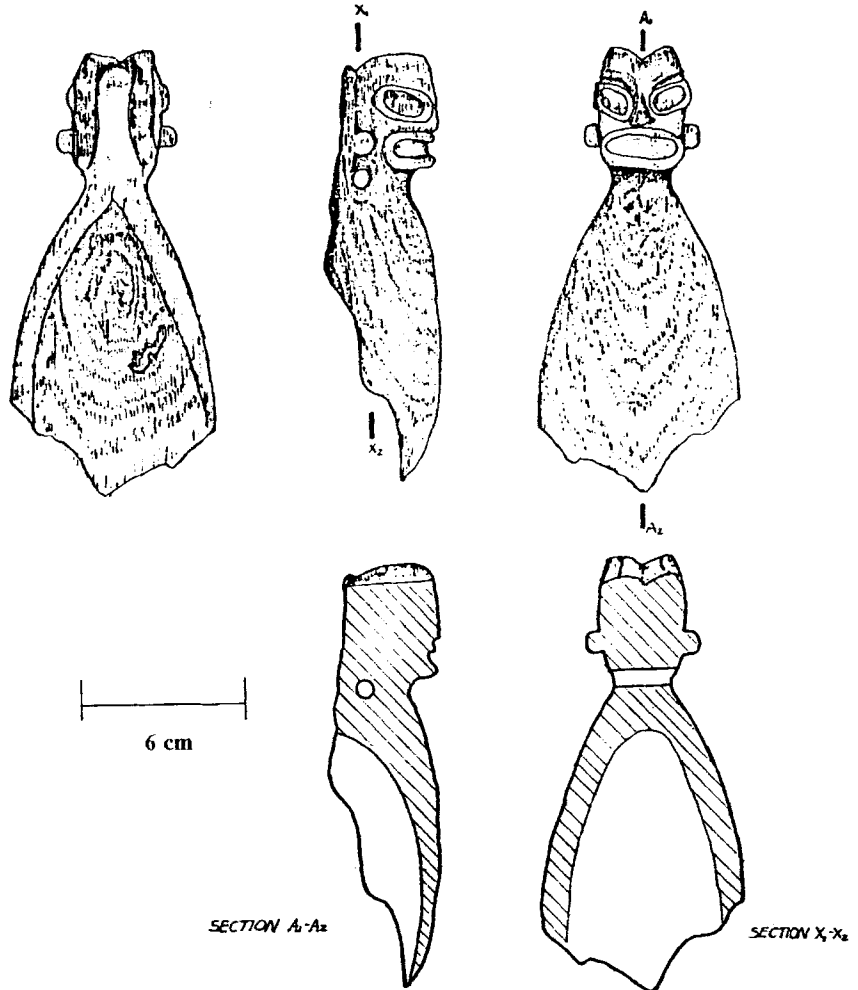


FIGURE 7. *Small ladle/ spoon with anthropomorphic handle from Aboukir. Height is 15.9 cm, maximum width is 7.7 cm. The Jamaica National Heritage Trust (Archaeology Division) Rec.1.10.92. Illustrated by B. Callum. Scale 1:2.26.*



FIGURE 8. Carved wooden duho stool from Dominican Republic. Note high polish, gold inlays on face and shoulders, and engraved decoration. Figure is 22.2 cm in height, 43.4 cm in length. (Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.)

image from Jamaica belongs.³ Most suggestive in this respect is the description by Las Casas (quoted in Arrom 1989: 106) of a *cacique* taking *cohoba* whilst sitting on an elaborately carved wooden *duho* stool. It was the *cohoba* ceremony that Columbus observed in 1495 ([1969]: 192).

In these houses are highly carved tables, round in shape like a chopping table, on which lies a special powder which they place on the heads of their *cemis* with certain rites. They then sniff up this powder through a double-branched cane, which they place in their nostrils. This powder intoxicates them . . .

3 The association of avian image-*zemís* and hallucinogenic *cohoba* may relate to complex Taíno beliefs concerning shamanic flight and spirit-trees, for which there exist South American parallels. Warao shamans launch supernatural attacks accompanied by an effigy of their avian master (Wilbert 1985: 154), and the Cubeo possess bird images representing patrons of mourning rituals and said to be under the effects of the hallucinogen *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Goldman 1979: 249).

Trees and the supernatural

Wooden *zemís*, *cohoba* and trees associate the physical and supernatural worlds of the Taíno in ways which are deeply rooted in wider Amerindian as well as specifically lowland Amazonian traditions of mythic thought (e.g. Heyden 1993). For Amazonian societies, trees possess a complex, multi-layered cosmological symbolism which link myths of origin (e.g. Métraux 1946: 369), the bestowal of cultural identity (e.g. Descola 1994: 19), and ideas of shamanic access to the spirit-world (e.g. Karsten 1964: 198–204; Roe 1982: 118–19; Sullivan 1988: 60–61). The Amazonian Barasana, for example, believe the *paxiuba* palm (*Iriartea exorrhiza*) to have grown from the ashes of the culture hero's body and to have carried his soul heavenwards as it grew — thus becoming a mediator between earth and sky (Hugh-Jones 1979: 157–8). The Brazilian Kuikuru believe that trees were once people in mythic time (Carneiro 1978: 214).

Analogous ideas are found amongst the Taíno of Hispaniola, of whom D'Anghera (1970: 168) records an origin myth in which men who failed to return to their caves before sunrise were turned into 'myrobolane' trees.⁴ The same author says that some *zemís* were made of wood 'because it is amongst the trees and in the darkness of the night they have received the message of the gods' (1970: 173). For lowland South American Amerindians as for the Taíno, the depths of the forest were sacred zones; spatially distant from the 'socialized' fields and village, and home to the largest trees; they were the places where spirits revealed themselves to humans.

According to Lovén (1935: 586–7), the Taíno of Hispaniola made wooden *zemís* only from trees occupied by the spirit of a dead *cacique*. Once carved, and no longer confined within the tree, the image-*zemí* was believed to be able to move about. In 19th-century Jamaica, Afro-Caribbean peoples believed that Ceiba trees assembled together at night (Rashford 1985: 51, and see below). These Caribbean beliefs parallel similar ones from northeastern South America concerning trees which move around by night (Roth, quoted in Lovén 1935: 588).

The way in which trees and wooden *zemís* articulate within Taíno world-view can be seen in an extraordinary quotation from Dr Chanca, Columbus' physician during his second voyage (Pané, *Relación*: 41–2, quoted in Stevens-Arroyo 1988: 59):

When a native was passing by a tree which was moved more than others by the wind, the Indian in fear calls out, 'Who are you?' The tree responds, 'Call here a *behique* or priest and I will tell you who I am'. When the priest or shaman had come to the tree . . . he performed certain prescribed ceremonies. . . . He would ask the tree, 'What are you doing here? What do you wish of me? . . . Tell me if you wish me to cut you down and . . . whether I shall make you a house and a farm and perform ceremonies for a year'. The tree answered these questions, and the man cut it down and made of it a statue or idol.

Here, the tree advertises its presence by being moved by the wind more than others — interestingly a structural characteristic of the

Ceiba (Descola 1994: 50). Is there a symbolic association between the animating wind, Amazonian ideas of the shaman's magical blowing powers (Butt 1956; Hugh-Jones 1979: 90–93), and — more specific to the Caribbean — the dangerous hurricanes, which were deified by the Taíno as Guabancex, the 'Lady of the Winds' (Arrom 1989: 46, 49–51; Bourne 1906: 333; Stevens-Arroyo 1988: 234–8)?

Another important correspondence between Amazonian and Caribbean expressions of arboreal symbolism concerns mortuary associations. The Kuikuru carve the memorial post to a dead chief from the *uengifi* tree which is believed to be occupied by the chief spirit of the forest (Carneiro 1978: 214–15). Similarly, among the Irurí during the 17th century, the principal men, their wives and children, were buried in great hollow tree trunks (Betendorf, quoted in Porro 1994: 88). Among the Warao of coastal Venezuela, trees are conceived as mythically important anthropomorphic spirits, and canoes made from their trunks can be used as coffins (Wilbert 1977: 33, 36, 37 figure 8; 1975: 169).

There is analogous evidence for the Taíno. Not only were tree trunks recognized as *zemís*, but some image-*zemís* carved from them functioned as coffins, containing the remains of dead *caciques* (Arrom 1989: figure 42; Centro de estudios avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe 1987: 54, illustration; Fewkes 1907: 56–7; Kerchache 1994: 130–39; Lovén 1935: 585). In a probable Taíno burial cave in Jamaica human bones were associated with a cedar-wood canoe (Flower 1895: 607). To be buried in a wooden *zemí* was to be symbolically interred within a hollow tree, and thus to be assured of rebirth (Peter G. Roe pers. comm.). When not disposed of in this way, a Taíno *cacique* might be buried sitting on his carved wooden *duho* stool (Fewkes 1907: 70; Scott 1985: 7, illustration), quite literally supported by the spirit of an ancestor which inhabited the wood.

Occasionally it is possible to be specific in terms of a particular tree. As Peter G. Roe (pers. comm.) has shown, the silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) is the principal 'spirit tree' of the Amazonian Shipibo. The tallest tree in the forest canopy, its upper reaches form a ladder for the shaman to visit the celestial sphere, and its deep roots help him visit the underworld.

The Ceiba is also present in the Greater Antilles (Vázquez de Espinosa 1942: 330), where,

4 This term is sometimes recognized as the Ceiba, and sometimes as a generic term for several tree varieties which had medicinal qualities.

for example, modern rural populations of Puerto Rico still revere it (Peter G. Roe pers.comm.). Given their regard for trees, it is possible that the Taíno also regarded the Ceiba as a spirit tree, perhaps the pre-eminent one — a view expressed by Nicholson (1983: 19). The continued spiritual importance of the Ceiba in Afro-Caribbean (especially Jamaican) culture as a ‘god tree’ associated with snakes, *obeah* and ghosts is documented by Rashford (1985); it probably descends, at least in part, from the Taíno (Cundall 1894: 65). The choice of Ceiba wood to carve the Jamaican figure of Baibrama clearly possesses levels of meaning which are difficult to assess solely by recourse to Caribbean ethnohistory.

The Ceiba has sharp spiny thorns on its lower trunk (Standley 1920–26: 791), and in lowland Amazonia these are analogous to the shaman’s supernatural *yoto* missiles, sent to cause illness or death (Peter G. Roe pers. comm.). Similar beliefs about the nature of illness are evident for the Carib and Taíno (Fewkes 1907: 60–62) and suggest the possibility that for them also the Ceiba was a shaman’s spirit tree. More generally for the Taíno, Europeans and Afro-Caribbean peoples, there are many beliefs concerning the spiritual and medicinal qualities of trees, their bark and leaves (e.g. Cundall 1894: 55–6; Rashford 1985: 52; Sloane 1725: 134; Vázquez de Espinosa 1942: 116, 330). The Ceiba itself is said to have emetic, diuretic and antispasmodic properties (Standley 1920–26: 791). Oviedo (1959: 8–9) reports that for the Taíno a decoction of wood from the *guayacán* tree (*Guaiacum officinale*) was a much-valued cure for syphilis (see also Crosby 1972: 154–5). Lovén (1935: 540) reports that the Taíno made their *zemís* from wood which they considered as possessing strong curative properties — an observation supported by Lehmann’s study of an elaborate *duho* stool from Haiti which was carved from *guayacán* wood (Lehmann 1951: 153, n.2).

Having established the spiritual importance of trees it is appropriate to consider wood as a symbolically important material. Objects made of black polished wood were regarded by the Taíno as markers of élite status (Helms 1986; Wilson 1986: 142–3). Chiefly *duhos*, canoes (Wilson 1986: 143–4) and ritual paraphernalia, such as *cohoba* snuffing tubes, were associated with Taíno *caciques* and shamans (Helms 1986: 27, 29). Apart from the spirituality of trees

per se, there was evidently also a cultural value placed on the shiny qualities of certain wooden artefacts, including their shell and metal inlays (see FIGURE 8) (Stevens-Arroyo 1988: 66). The idea that by carving and polishing wooden objects ancestral spirits or essences dwelling within were revealed or liberated, is suggestive of complex and apparently pan-Amerindian notions of ‘sacred brilliance’ associated with metals (Lechtman 1993: 269; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988), precious and semi-precious stones (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981), and mirrors (Saunders 1988).

The symbolism of trees and wooden artefacts featured also in the contacts between the Taíno and the Spanish. On first seeing Hispaniola and Jamaica, Columbus was amazed at the remarkable abundance and variety of trees (Columbus 1969: 155; Vázquez de Espinosa 1942: 118). He saw these forests sawn up into planks for caravels, or raised as masts for the largest ships in Spain (Gerbi 1986: 18). Conversely, the Taíno saw the Spanish, their unfamiliar goods and their large wooden ships with masts like trees, as *turey*, things which came from the sky, charged with supernatural power (Chanca 1932: 64; and see Helms 1988: 187).

When Bartolomé Columbus visited the Taíno chiefdom of Xaraguá on Hispaniola he was met by a people whose first act was to offer him branches and palms (Las Casas, quoted in Wilson 1986: 121–2). Subsequently, the high-ranking Taíno woman Anacaona presented him with prestige items of black polished wood, including 14 beautifully carved *duhos* (D’Anghera 1970: 125). Against Taíno beliefs in the spiritual and life-giving qualities of trees, the Spanish subsequently hanged Anacaona and burned Taínos whom they suspended from specially constructed timber gibbets (Las Casas 1992: 16, illustration, 22; Walker 1992: 299, illustration).

Conclusion

Wooden *zemís*, amongst the most elaborate and distinctive of Taíno artefacts, have received little systematic analytical study (but see Helms 1986). Despite being amenable to radiocarbon dating, botanical identification, chemical analysis of adhering resin and the potential of analogical explanation, many remain undated, their material unidentified and their possible semantic ‘connections’ with South America unexplored. They have been identified with a few major gods,

regardless of wood type, age, stylistic variability and geographical/cultural location, in an approach that denies the informative role of diversity in throwing light on wider conceptual issues, on, for example, the significance of wood type, presence/absence of polishing, and form.

Evidence from lowland South America as well as the Caribbean indicates that trees and wood possessed a rich symbolism for indigenous peoples. For the Taíno, trees contained spirits, and the *zemís* carved from them bestowed animated shape and elite status. The

complex relationship between the physical and symbolic landscapes of the Taíno represents a unique opportunity to investigate a world-view that was fundamentally Amerindian and also distinctively Caribbean.

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