

# The Taíno: Phenomena, Concepts, and Terms

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L. Antonio Curet, *National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution*

**Abstract.** The Taíno term and concept has traditionally been used as a designation of some form of cultural identity for the groups that occupied the Greater Antilles at the time of contact. This perspective assumes that these groups shared a cultural background because of a common ancestry. However, this position has been questioned in recent years, and many problems with the concept have been brought to light. This article presents the history of the concept and discusses three recent studies that have proposed new ways to approach the problem. It ends by presenting the implications of this new perspective for future research, their limitations, how they may be misapplied, and to what extent they are applicable in different situations.

When Europeans arrived in the Americas they began differentiating Amerindian groups by creating classification systems that, though relatively simplistic and incomplete, were used for decades by colonial officials. Historians, ethnohistorians, archaeologists, and anthropologists not only adopted these systems but also eventually added new categories based on their interpretations of both the ethnohistoric and archaeological records. The result is the uncritical adoption and perpetuation of vague, colonial classification systems as “natural” units, a practice that has created considerable confusion among scholars. A prime example of this phenomenon is found in the Caribbean islands (fig. 1), the arena of the initial contact between Europeans and “pristine” Amerindians (De La Luz-Rodríguez 2011; Whitehead 2002).

For more than a hundred years, Caribbean historiography has made use of ethnonyms such as *Taíno*, *Carib(e)*, and *Igneri* to name both pre-Columbian and contact-period groups of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The etymologies of these words are clearly indigenous in origin, which, in

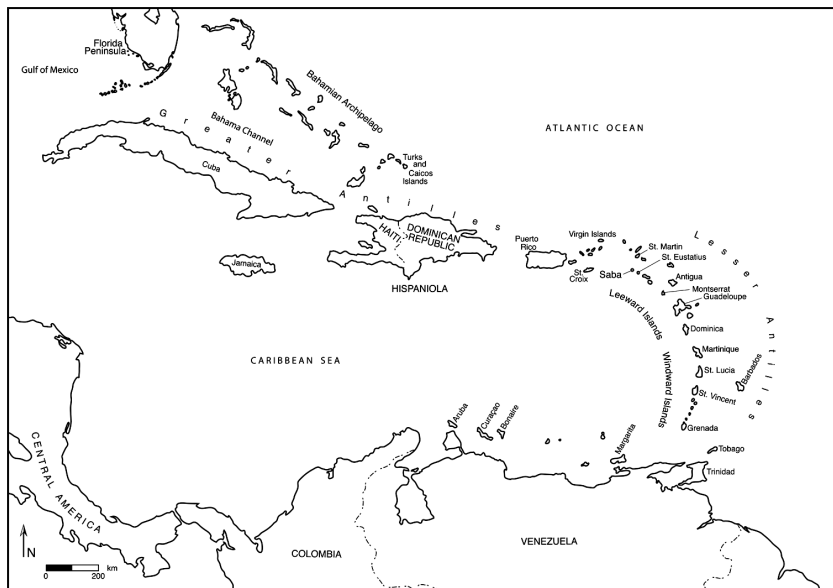


Figure 1. Map of the Caribbean Basin. Drawing by Jill Seagard

the opinions of many, justifies their use by historians and archaeologists. A review of the history of the use of these names in the literature, however, calls into question their validity and usefulness for historical and archaeological studies. This article briefly discusses the origin of the concept *taino* and its multiple uses as well as the issues and problems associated with it. I also examine the implications of its use (or misuse) on our modeling of past human behavior and the recent redirection of the term. I conclude with some cautionary notes and suggestions for future research using these new approaches.

### A Matter of Definition

Before discussing the etymology of the case at hand, I believe it is appropriate to define three words that are used throughout this work in reference to the scholarly use of *taino*. These are *term*, *concept*, and *phenomenon*. The necessity for this clarification stems from both the fact that the word *taino* can be and has been used indiscriminately as a term, a concept, or a phenomenon and the fact that it has been assigned different meanings. These three descriptors are not highly technical terms; on the contrary, they are

used commonly in the daily life of scholars or the general public. In many scholarly works, however, they have been used interchangeably to refer to the same idea. While this has been done correctly in many cases, in others they are interchanged inappropriately because of the lack of concordance between these three words.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *term* as “a word or expression that has a precise meaning in some uses or is peculiar to a science, art, profession, or subject.” Basically, a term is the label, the name, or a noun (common or proper) that a discipline assigns to an idea and that carries a “precise meaning.” *Concept*, on the other hand, is something conceived in the mind; a thought or notion; an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances. Thus *concept* refers to the idea that carries the “precise meaning” that a term should have; the meaning behind the term. Finally, a *phenomenon* is an observable fact or event. A phenomenon is independent of the term or the meaning we ascribe to it.<sup>1</sup>

However, even though a phenomenon has to be something observable (factual), in this work I make use of what I call an *imagined phenomenon* or *pseudo-phenomenon*, the tendency to present interpretations of factual evidence as actual facts. Simply, some researchers confuse a concept developed from interpreting a “fact” with the actual phenomenon or fact. In Peirce’s terminology (see note 1), this is taking an interpretant as an object (reality). For example, according to some chronicles (e.g., Las Casas 1967: 308), the *cacica* (female chief) Anacaona lived in her husband’s village, *cacique* (chief) Caonabo. Based on this, some scholars have inferred that Amerindians or the elite from the Greater Antilles followed a patrilocal rule of residence (Rouse 1948). The “observable event” or true phenomenon is that Anacaona lived in her husband’s village. The assertion that Amerindians from the Greater Antilles followed the patrilocal rule of locality is simply an interpretation, or hypothesis.

In this article I differentiate between the use of the word *taíno* as term (the word), as concept (the definition[s] assigned to the word), and as phenomenon (the “fact” that is being characterized).<sup>2</sup> It is clear that the term *taíno* has its origin in the early European writings in the Caribbean. Contrary to what many people believe, however, the early Spanish writers never used the proper noun (term) *Taíno* to refer to the Indians of the Greater Antilles, even when they created a “Taíno” concept of the good, noble Indian (De La Luz-Rodríguez 2011; Whitehead 2002) of the Greater Antilles to differentiate that Indian from the simpler *Lucayos* (from the Bahamian archipelago), and the more aggressive (savage) Caribes (from the Lesser Antilles). Supposedly, the word *taíno* itself means “good” or “noble,” in one or more local Arawakan languages (for disputation, see De La Luz-Rodríguez 2011 and

Lewis-Galanes 1986). It is first reported by Pedro Mártir de Anglería (1964: 1:109) in a list of island words learned during Columbus's first voyage, but he does not provide the context in which these words were first heard and interpreted by Europeans. Interestingly, no mention of this word appears in Columbus's journal for that voyage. The earliest account of Europeans actually hearing the word *taíno* for the first time is during Columbus's second voyage, in 1493, when they first landed in Guadeloupe (Alvarez Chanca 1966: 52; Bernáldez 1953: 661). Here Columbus's men encountered a group of Caribes from this island and captive women and children from Puerto Rico. Once they met the Spaniards, they used the word *tayno* or *tainon* to mean that they were "good." It is clear that the term was used more as a qualifying adjective to refer to a concept of goodness (the phenomenon) rather than as an ethnic label or ethnonym as it has been used by many scholars (see also Torres Etayo 2006). They were saying that they were the "good people, not the bad guys" (Oliver 2009: 6), something similar to the traditional "we come in peace." In fact, primary sources such as Diego Álvarez Chanca (1966: 52), Andrés Bernáldez (1953: 661), and Mártir de Anglería (1964: 1:123) did not capitalize the term "tayno" when telling the story, while they did capitalize other ethnonyms such as "Caribe." We cannot, therefore, say with any degree of certainty that the native people of the Greater Antilles used *taíno* (term) to refer to their communal identity or ethos. This is all to say that the term *taíno* is an Arawak word (adjective) that refers to a concept of goodness or nobility but that has been used with other meanings by scholars (see below).

As a nonnative phenomenon, Taíno refers to the widespread distribution of certain cultural traits across the Greater Antilles, Bahamas, and some of the Lesser Antilles. In actuality, one can talk about two Taíno phenomena, one defined using "facts" from the chronicles and a second one characterized by attributes observable in the material culture found across the region. In the case of the chronicles, attributes include language, social organization, religious beliefs, subsistence systems, religious paraphernalia, and tools. Adriana Lewis-Galanes (1986: 53) and Gabriel De La Luz-Rodríguez (2011) argue that during these early years of the colonial experience, the Spanish invented a "Taíno" concept (without using the term) to refer "to a diverse constellation of Indigenous cultures that inhabited the Greater Antilles" (De La Luz-Rodríguez 2011: 94; see also Sued Badillo 1978). Accordingly, this concept attributed a noble, peaceful, and good nature to these groups (i.e., the noble savage) in contrast to the flesh-eating, warlike, and savage Caribes (i.e., true savages) (see also Whitehead 2002). I consider this an imagined phenomenon that eventually was accepted and perpetuated by the traditional historiography and archaeology in what

later is referred to as the Taíno culture (concept and term). Archaeological attributes, on the other hand, include the types and styles of material culture—especially, but not limited to, ceramics and religious artifacts. Both types of phenomena emphasize the supposed similarities observable in those two sources of data at the expense of dissimilarities and treat all the groups that inhabited the Greater Antilles and beyond as a single and homogeneous cultural unit. So it can be said that both uses of the term (archaeological and ethnohistoric) are also pseudo-phenomena, first, because these uses are referring to a false cultural uniformity throughout the archipelago, and second, because they are employing a term that refers to a condition of goodness (reality or object in semiotics) and have applied it to another false phenomenon.

Finally, taíno as a concept refers to both the original meaning of the Arawak word as mentioned earlier (i.e., goodness) and the diverse range of constructions of a culture based on ideas developed or interpreted from the two phenomena described in the previous paragraph, especially the idea of a common and homogeneous cultural, linguistic, social, geographic, and even political unit. Despite its multiple definitions, the term *taíno* has become well accepted in Caribbean archaeology, anthropology, and history, with a general perception that we all share the same definition (concept) referring to the same phenomenon. In reality, however, it has been used either without a clear definition or with multiple definitions. Scholarly use of the term ranges from a linguistic (Arawakan) qualifier to an array of phenomena, some of them imagined phenomena.

### A History of the Scholarly Use of the Term and Its Meanings

In general, the word *Taíno* has been widely used to name the groups that inhabited most of the Greater Antilles at the time of contact (García Arévalo 2012; Guarch Delmonte 1978: 7; Jiménez Lambertus 2012; Keegan 2013; Veloz Maggiolo 1989, 1991, 1993; Wilson 1990). To the best of my knowledge, Rafinesque (1836) was the first scholar to use the term as a proper noun to distinguish the Arawakan languages of the Greater Antilles from those of the Lesser Antilles. According to Cayetano Coll y Toste (1907: 55), the German ethnographer Carl F. P. Martius (1867) was the first to use the term *Taíno* to refer to the native groups of the island of Haiti, arguing that these groups called themselves *Taini*, perhaps by mistaking the qualifier for an ethnonym. The term was first adopted by Caribbean historiography in 1883 when Antonio Bachiller y Morales used it in his book titled *Cuba Primitiva* (Chanlatte Baik 2000: 37).

During the twentieth century, scholars began to use the term *Táino* primarily to refer to a cultural, biological, or linguistic population that minimally inhabited Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Jamaica, eastern Cuba, and the Bahamas.<sup>3</sup> For example, Fewkes (1907: 26) applied the term *Táino* when alluding to “the original sedentary people of the West Indies, as distinguished from the Carib, or any mixture of the two, such as is found in the southern islands and certain littoral regions of the Greater Antilles.” Harrington (1921) used it to refer to some indigenous groups of Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and eastern Cuba, specifically to those that were “much more advanced.” He also developed the term “Sub-Táino” to name Arawakan groups that were not as “developed” as and were perhaps older than the Táino. In 1935, Sven Lovén (1935: vi) made a distinction between Táino or “Arawaks on the Greater Antilles and Bahamas” and the “Proper Tainan culture,” defined as “the higher Tainan civilization developed on Puerto Rico and Española.” Presumably, Lovén used a combination of linguistic (i.e., the Arawakan language family) and cultural (i.e., civilization) criteria to define the cultural concept.

During the 1940s, Irving B. Rouse (e.g., 1948a: 521–522, 1948b: 547) used the criteria developed by Harrington to categorize the groups of the Greater Antilles at the time of contact as Táino. Later on, Noble (1965) used the term to name the language of the Greater Antilles related to the Arawakan family of languages. Ricardo E. Alegría (1965: 249) also associated the Capá pottery style of the late precolonial period of western Puerto Rico “with the elaborate ceremonialism which characterize the Táino Indians who inhabited Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and eastern Cuba at the time of the Spanish conquest.” Francisco Moscoso (1986) later extended the use of the term back in time to also include all the cultures from previous periods (i.e., the early Ostionoid in Rouse’s [1992] classification system or Pre-Táino in Alegría’s [1965] model) that developed locally after the initial migration from South America (i.e., all post-Saladoid groups). Later on, Rouse (1986, 1992) revised his cultural classification system and used the term to refer to the groups that inhabited the Bahamas and all of the Greater Antilles, excepting western Cuba. While Rouse used diverse cultural traits to characterize these groups, he emphasized language as a main criterion, since “the Táinos spoke a single language” (1992: 23). Recognizing some variability within the concept of Táino, Rouse (5–9) ultimately subdivided the groups into four different categories based on their “level of development” and their geographic location: Classic Táino (Hispaniola and Puerto Rico), Western Táino (Cuba and Jamaica), Eastern Táino (Northern Lesser Antilles), and Lucayan Táino (the Bahamian Archipelago, following Keegan and Maclachlan 1989; see also Keegan 1997). William F. Kee-

gan (2013: 70) also defines Taínos as “the native people who occupied the Greater Antilles during the Spanish invasion,” while Sinelli (2013) and Wesler (2013) expanded the definition to include another archaeological culture known as Meillacan Mellacoid.

More recently, the term *Taíno* (and other similar terms, e.g., *Siboney*) has been used in genetic studies, explicitly or implicitly, to define supposed biological populations that occupied the Greater Antilles (Coppa, et al. 2005; Lalueza Fox et al. 2001; Martínez Cruzado et al. 2001). Even though these authors are clearly using the term as a “biological” concept, they are employing terms that are defined using cultural and linguistic criteria. In other words, either these researchers did not see the lack of concordance between their units of analysis or are implying that cultural and linguistic groups can be considered genetic populations. Either way, here, too, the term is being used to name a concept based on an imagined phenomenon.

Today the concept of Taíno as a generalized, ill-defined cultural unit has found its way into the popular culture, literature, and school textbooks of the Caribbean, and it is so strongly rooted in the local conception of culture in cases such as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic that it has been purposefully used in the creation or invention of national identities.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in many instances, the so-called Taíno culture has a more pre-eminent role in these identities than, say, the African influence, despite the fact that large parts of the population show strong cultural and biological connections with the latter (Dávila 2001; Duany 2001). The concept has also been used by Neo-Taíno Nations, recently organized groups who claim descent from the original inhabitants of the Greater Antilles, especially from the Spanish-speaking islands (Castahna 2011; Curet forthcoming; and Haslip-Viera 2001).

Summarizing, the term *Taíno* has been used to refer to many things; it is one term that has come to represent multiple concepts. These include everything from its use as a label for one or more ethnic groups, to a language or related languages, to a culture or cultures, to “highly developed” societies, to anyone who was living in the northern Caribbean at the time of Columbus (culture area), to genetic/biological populations, to contemporaneous groups who claim to be descendants of the ancient “Taínos.”

### Problems with the Concept(s)

Despite its widespread use in academic and popular publications, the use of the term *Taíno* has not gone without criticism or opposition. As early as 1897, Coll y Toste (1907: 55) was already criticizing its use and questioning its scientific basis and value and suggested using instead names such as

*siboneyes*, *haytianos*, *jamaikininos*, and *borinqueños* that were more related to actual terms used by the natives to refer to the islands. More recently, Luis A. Chanlatte Baik (2000), Chanlatte Baik and Yvonne M. Narganes Stordes (1983), De La Luz (2011), Lewis-Galanes (1986), and Marcio Veloz Maggiolo (1989, 1991, 1993) have emerged as opponents of this term, especially because it has no true anthropological or historical meaning and it tends to homogenize a large number of groups with different identities. Following Peter Hulme (1986), De La Luz (2011: 96) believes “that the invention of the concept *Taíno* was necessary for the production of an imaginary and polarizing cultural geography which perpetuated colonialist practices of exploitation” (see also Whitehead 2002). Daniel Torres Etayo (2006) and Roberto Valcárcel Rojas (2008) have also questioned its use in Cuban and Caribbean archaeology both because of the myriad of meanings given to it and because of its detachment from the cultural reality observed in the ethnohistoric and archaeological records. Therefore, most of the haphazard use of the term to date relates to the lack of concordance between the concept of a single, homogeneous indigenous cultural unit and the strong ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence (phenomenon) that paints a picture of much greater diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and political groups in the region (e.g., Anderson Córdova, 1990; Curet 2002, 2003; McGinnis 1997, 2001; Wilson 2001a, 2001b).

### Defining the Taíno Paradox

Thus it is clear that both the term and concept(s) of Taíno run into major epistemological problems when applied in a rigorous and disciplined matter. The term has been used to refer to too many concepts to be meaningful at all. But the problems are related not only to the poor definition of the concept(s) but also to the complex phenomenon that they are trying to conceptualize. While it is true that the concept(s) emphasize the similarities and ignore the marked variability, we have to admit that it is very difficult to define a concept that can integrate both of these traits in a harmonious way. Thus, on one hand, there is strong evidence of cultural variability in both the archaeological and the ethnohistoric records that puts into question the term *Taíno*, but on the other hand both records also show the presence of general commonalities shared by the groups of the northern Caribbean. In this case, then, the phenomenon or observed fact is neither cultural homogeneity nor heterogeneity but both at the same time.

Interestingly, economic practices related to subsistence aside, one could argue that the majority of the commonalities tend to be related to symbolism and ideology, including language, and how they are reflected in the material culture. Most of the criteria traditionally used to define what



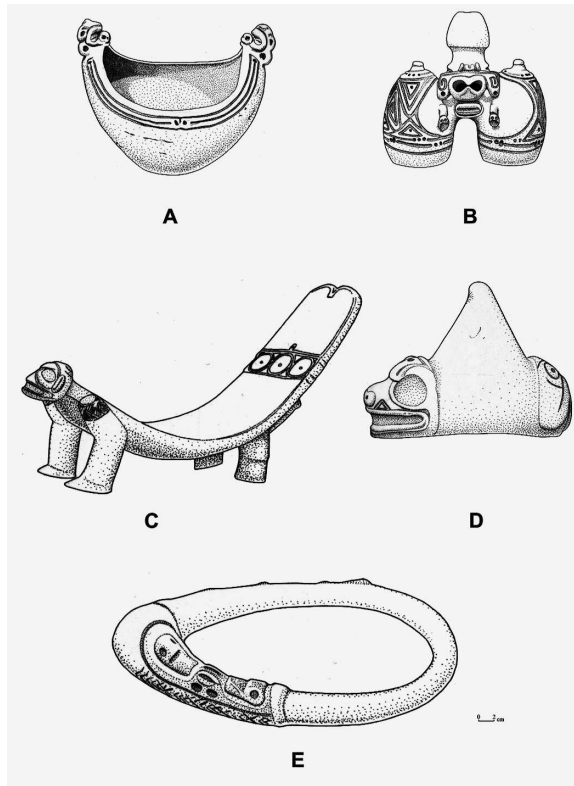


Figure 2. Taíno (Chican Ostionoid) pottery and ceremonial objects: A–B, pottery from Hispaniola (postcards in possession of the author); C, ceremonial seat or *duho* from Hispaniola (after Kerchache 1994); D, three-pointed idol or zemi from Puerto Rico (postcard in possession of the author); E, stone collar or belt from Puerto Rico (after Bercht et al., 1997). Drawings by Jill Seagard

is Taíno archaeologically are restricted to ceramic designs and motifs, ball courts and plazas, ritual paraphernalia, three-pointer idols, and *duhos* or ceremonial stools (see examples in fig. 2). Ethnohistorically, some of these commonalities include language and religious practices such as the *cohoba* ceremony (a hallucinogen-based ritual), *areytos* or feasting, and the ball game. It is clear, however, that this does not necessarily indicate that all these practices and artifacts were used in the same or identical ways and with the same meanings across the Greater Antilles, Bahamas, and the Virgin Islands. There are definitely qualitative and quantitative differences in designs and themes as well as variations among ball courts, plazas, idols,

duhos, and so on. The point is that despite the strong evidence of variability, the material culture and cultural practices on these islands do show strong similarities that cannot be discarded. Colloquially, these traits have a “Taíno feeling” or “Taíno taste.” This is why the concept has become commonplace among scholars despite its problematic origin. The issue now becomes explaining the dichotomy between the fallacy of the term as a form of common identity among disparate groups and the acknowledgment of indisputable similarities among these groups. I call this dichotomy the Taíno Paradox. The next section provides an overview of three recent approaches that consider these points and have helped advance the understanding and explanation of the phenomenon traditionally called Taíno.

### Recent Alternative Approaches to the Taíno Paradox

Three recent studies (Oliver 2009; Rodríguez Ramos 2010; Torres Etayo 2006) have dealt with the issues of the traditional concepts of Taíno and have proposed new ways to approach the problem. Of these three approaches, the one presented by Reniel Rodríguez Ramos arguably has had the greatest impact (but not necessarily acceptance) in the region. He proposes the use of the concept of an ideological spectrum that he calls “Taínoness” to explain the Taíno Paradox:

In this sense, instead of a “Taíno people,” what existed was a spectrum of Taínoness whose diverse representations resulted from the variable negotiations in which at least some of the indigenous peoples of the islands engaged in order to facilitate their interactions while retaining their differences. In some cases, some of the elements of such Taínoness show variable syncretisms of the ideological narratives that might have been derived from the different ancestral histories of each of the different groups that inhabited the islands where this spectrum was manifested. The mosaic of syncretisms observed at this time is thus the result of the myriad of interactions and negotiations in which those different peoples were engaged within the islands and with the inhabitants of the surrounding continental regions with which they were interacting. (Rodríguez Ramos 2010: 200)

This proposal is a marked deviation from the traditional Taíno concept for at least three reasons. First, Taínoness is not simply a cultural term but a concept that developed from historical and social processes. This is critical, because it astutely observes that what we call Taíno does not simply refer to culturally evolved descendants of the early South American Saladoids. Rather, it is the result of multiethnic, and even multiregional (e.g., Caribbean islands and the Isthmo-Colombian Area), interactions and syn-

cretisms decided by social actors. Second, it explains both the diversity and commonalities present in the phenomenon without assuming shared, homogeneous identities. Finally, it denies the use of the term as an ethnonym.

José Oliver (2009) has used the Taínoness concept productively in his semiotic study of “Taíno” cosmology, ideology, worldview, and religion. In this study he attempts to reconstruct the Taíno worldview (tangible and intangible) from a holistic perspective. Within this reconstruction, Taínoness provides the potential to identify possible elements of the “ideological spectrum,” helping Oliver to identify the “rules,” dogmas, canons, and tenets of the usage of those elements. Therefore, although the ideological elements encompassed under the concept of Taínoness allowed native communities to select which elements to emphasize, concepts such as *cemúism*, individualism, and personhood created relatively universal standards among the groups. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility of agency or localized manipulation of both the ideological elements and the rules.

Torres Etayo (2006) addresses the issue from a similar perspective but recommends a different approach. Focusing his criticism on the use of the term in Cuban historiography, Torres Etayo’s study is a critical analysis from a Marxist point of view and is organized from a historical perspective. He begins his examination with the antiquarians of the late nineteenth century and the normative approach of cultural historians influenced by American scholars, concluding with the early Marxist archaeology of post-Revolutionary Cuba. He argues that although Cuban archaeological perspectives have changed over the years, all interpretations, through the use of generalized concepts like Taíno, have perpetuated a normative view and definition of archaeological culture. Accordingly, a great part of the problem is that Cuban archaeology lacks a clear definition of the concept of archaeological culture. Thus to begin solving the problem, he suggests using a Marxist perspective, not in the dogmatic sense encouraged during the first two decades following the Revolution but by adhering to the tenets of Latin American Social Archaeology (LASA) as developed recently by Luis Felipe Bate (1998). From this perspective, the concept of *modos de vida* (lifeways) as conceived by LASA practitioners is what links the concept of culture (archaeological cultures in this case) to the Marxist idea of social formations. Thus the solution to the Taíno issue is not a simple redefinition of the concept or the issue of the phenomenon but begins by ensuring that our epistemology and ontology are in accordance with our paradigms or theoretical positions (in the sense of Bate 1998). In other words, we cannot keep haphazardly changing our theoretical perspectives and keep using the same epistemology developed for other paradigms (see also Pestle et al. 2013). Once the concept of archaeological culture is well defined, then Cuban archaeologists can begin identifying localized cultures.

Despite the persuasiveness of many of the arguments of these three authors, there are still challenging matters that warrant examination. These issues have to do not so much with the proposed concepts themselves as with their limitations, how they may be (mis-)applied, and to what extent they are applicable in different situations. Concentrating on Rodríguez Ramos's concept of Taínoness because of its suitability and its impact on Caribbean archaeology and including Oliver's and Torres Etayo's complementary ideas, the next section reviews some of the potential pitfalls of these alternative views.

### *What's in a Name?*

As shown above, the concept of Taínoness was developed out of an effort to debunk the Taíno concept(s) while simultaneously explaining the development of the Taíno Paradox. For this reason, it should not be surprising to find the actual word *Taíno* at the root of its name. However, despite the obvious reasons for keeping the term, scholars should be concerned that doing so may lead to a perpetuation of some of the problems already discussed with the original usage of the term *Taíno*. This may be a small concern related to the misunderstanding of the concept, but by retaining the same term, we may be implying some form of identity that is shared on a large scale by all of the groups with some form of Taínoness. Even worse, it may lead some people to mechanically and uncritically use all of the traditional attributes that defined the term *Taíno* as the symbolic spectrum defined by Taínoness. That is, we may be using a new term (Taínoness) to refer to the same old concept of Taíno. For example, in conversations with many colleagues, it seems there is a tendency to use *Taínoness* as a synonym for the term *Taíno*, especially by equating it to the archaeological Chican Ostionoid subseries (fig. 2). But few people have addressed the issue of whether to include the contemporary Meillacan Ostionoid subseries in the spectrum (see fig. 3 for some examples of the Meillacan pottery). Is the Meillacan Ostionoid considered part of the spectrum defined by Taínoness? Many would likely respond *no* to this question, because in our minds Taínoness refers to the symbols included in what we have called Taíno (i.e., Chican Ostionoid) (see Sinelli 2013 and Wesler 2013 for opposite opinions). To a degree, Oliver (2009: 27–30) seems to circumvent this problem by equating Taínoness to the fundamental religious beliefs of cemísm. But this may bring some new problems in its application if it is taken as a monolithic phenomenon, as cemísm is found in groups as far south as the Windward Islands.

It is clear that Rodríguez Ramos argued for more than the mere replacement of a term. The concept should refer to dynamic historical and social processes and not to the result of simple “cultural evolution” from

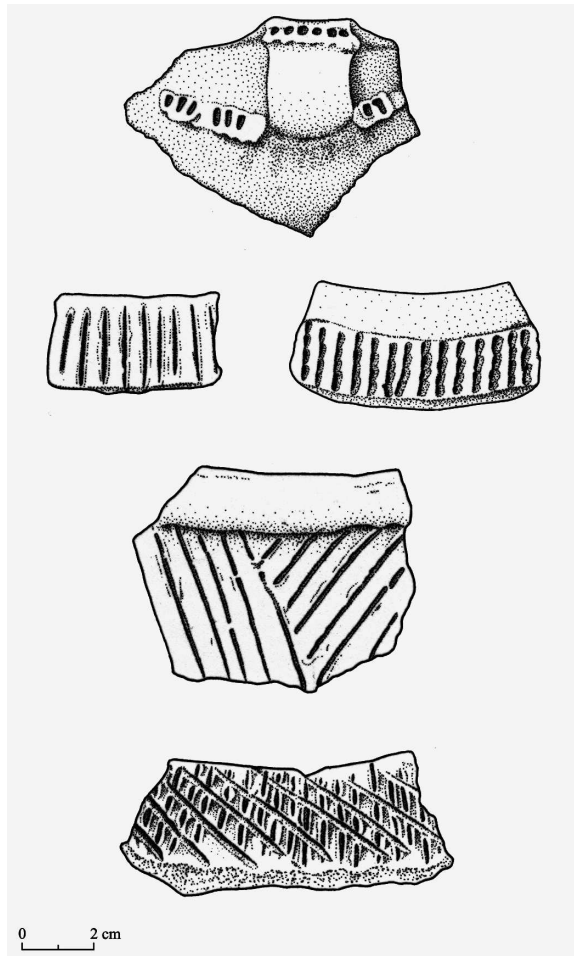


Figure 3. Examples of Meillacan pottery (after Veloz Maggiolo, Ortega, and Caba 1981). Drawings by Jill Seagard

a common ancestor. However, by calling it Taínoness, we are limiting the phenomenon simply to the late Prehispanic period in the Greater Antilles and to what the early proposers of the term decided to call Taíno. In name at least, it does not seem to be applicable to other periods or other ethno-historic or archaeological groups within the region, therefore indirectly making the concept static instead. The case of the Meillacan vs. Chican sub-series comes to mind again, where, while both are present in Cuba and His-

paniola, the latter is traditionally related to Taíno groups and the former is not (see Sinelli 2013 for an exception). The traditional perspective is that the Meillacan pottery is originally found, and is more prevalent in, the Macorix region (northeastern Hispaniola) that, according to the chronicles, was occupied by groups different from those of other regions of the island. However, recent archaeological studies by Oliver and Ulloa Hung (pers. comm., 2011) have shown Meillacoid (Macories) and Chican (Taínos) coexisting in the same region at the same time. There are even instances of single vessels presenting both Meillacan and Chican modes. In terms of similar processes in other periods, the earlier Ostionan Ostionoid case may be an example of a set of ideological elements being shared by many groups from the central Lesser Antilles to perhaps Bahamas.

The argument here is that we should not assume that the symbols included in the spectrum defined by Taínoness are the same as those traditionally associated with the problematic concept of Taíno. Doing so implies that we are using the same concept (with all its problems), under a different name. Further, processes similar to Taínoness may have been present in previous periods and in other regions of the Caribbean, which means that multiple symbolic spectra may have existed and that those spectra may have changed through time and space. Truly, this synchronical and diachronic variability can be more informative and illuminating than homogeneous patterns. The ideological elements that were used in different regions (especially contiguous areas) may give us some indications of the choices made by each group and shed some light on the political, social, and ideological strategies or aspects of their social organization and dynamics (see Oliver 2008 for an example of this type of variability). Changes over time can also inform us about changes in political strategies or in the sociopolitical organization of those groups. Thus by limiting this concept to the Taíno phenomenon we are limiting the interpretative value of the concept.

To minimize the repercussions of these limitations, it would be wise to separate the limited phenomenon of Taínoness from the concept. Moreover, in reference to these spectra, I suggest making use of the concept of *symbolic reservoir* developed by several Africanists to explain the historical trends of various regions of Africa with a situation similar to that of the “Taínos.” The concept is so similar to the idea of Taínoness that Oliver (2009: 28) makes use of African cases in his cross-cultural comparison as examples similar to the development of the Taíno worldview.<sup>5</sup>

Roderick J. McInstosh (1998: 16) defines symbolic reservoir as “the assemblage of symbols, beliefs, and myths from which groups or subgroups obtain the ideological tools necessary to ‘create’ a cultural tradition to legitimize their own interests.” These ideological tools tend to be rooted

first in the past history of the groups involved and, second, in the particularities of interaction between these groups through their convoluted history. Implied in this definition and discussion is that the symbolic reservoir can be tapped and its symbols and other ideological “contents” manipulated at different times in history. Some symbols and their material expression can be chosen over others and, more importantly, their meanings can be manipulated, negotiated, redefined, reinterpreted, or rejected according to the particular social and political conditions at one point in history. Moreover, the pool of symbols selected by the different groups, their material and stylistic expressions, and their meanings can change through time and space, but they belong to the same reservoir. As in the case of Taínoness as suggested by Rodríguez Ramos, McIntosh stresses that “the idea of the symbolic reservoir is simply a device to focus investigation on the mechanisms by which certain defining symbols or beliefs undergo constant reinvention over the centuries, always welling up from a deep fount of core values” (*ibid.*).

This concept is useful in explaining the similarities in the assemblages from the Greater Antilles and Bahamas and even from the “Taíno” sites reported outside the traditional Taíno culture area in the Leeward Islands (Crock 2005; Hooglan and Hofman 1999). But contrary to Taínoness, symbolic reservoir can be applied to other periods, areas, and symbolic spectra. Like the concept of Taínoness, it honors the role of agency; it does not necessarily assume uniformity in space, time, or cultural context; it is historically contingent; and it accepts that cultural symbols (including non-material symbols such as language and “attitudes” [see Santos-Granero 2002; other essays in Hill and Santos-Granero 2002; and Hongborg and Hill 2011]) can be manipulated according to the political and social conditions. This concept recognizes that a generalized system of beliefs was present in most of this region, as Oliver maintains, but it does not argue that the same symbols—and by association, beliefs, practices (e.g., ideological grammars), and their material expressions—were equally used or emphasized everywhere and all the time.

However, it is important to point out that according to its definition, the concept of symbolic reservoir as it was developed for the Niger region is “reserved” primarily for cases of “complex societies” (McIntosh 1998: 17). This should not be considered a requirement, as there are various multiethnic situations where nonstratified societies in close interaction may develop similar sets of ideological elements (e.g., Torres 2012; Paukutat 2007).

Overall, the concept of symbolic reservoir has several advantages over Taínoness. Importantly, it is a generic, anthropological term that is not com-

mitted to a particular time, area, or set of cultural symbols. It transcends the time and space dimensions. It does not assume that the ideological spectrum is static, forcing us to identify the set of ideological elements present in one area at each point in time. Finally, it releases the concept of all the baggage, unfounded assumptions, and definitions related to the Taíno concept. Therefore, while I keep using the term *Taínoness* throughout the rest of this article for the sake of simplicity, I strongly recommend to cease using it and to develop new localized terminology for the many symbolic reservoirs present in ancient times in the Caribbean, such as the “web” identified by Oliver (2009) for western Puerto Rico and eastern Hispaniola. Perhaps the only case I can think where it still will be appropriate to use the term *Taíno* will be to identify the Arawak language spoken in the Greater Antilles.

### *Scale and Level of Interpretations*

Another concern with the application of concepts such as Taínoness (or symbolic reservoir) and the general cosmology and worldview discussed by Oliver is the danger of limiting its use to large scales and high cultural levels. It is easy to see how these concepts, developed to the scale of either the Greater Antilles in the case of Taínoness or the Caribbean in the case of Oliver, can be applied indiscriminately by some to smaller social units at lower levels of social organization without determining their applicability. Alternatively, but equally dangerous, they may be kept at those high levels and large scales and not applied to smaller units such as more localized regions, communities, households, and specific polities that are normally the levels where agents operate and decisions are made. Thus agency is lost.

Moreover, if applied incorrectly, we may run into the same epistemological problems that concepts such as Taíno, culture, and Rousian series have. These are concepts that are normally applied from top to bottom and are seen as determinant of social behavior. They are concepts that were developed in the first half of the twentieth century where cultural norms took a privileged position in determining people’s behavior. Therefore, members of the same culture (ethnographic or archaeological) will follow the same behavioral tendencies imposed by the cultural norms. This type of reasoning is a trademark of normativism that has haunted the discipline at large for decades and that continues to be prevalent in the Caribbean (see Pestle et al. 2013). For example, Saladoid archaeological sites are expected to have all the characteristics of the Saladoid series. Or, if a cultural practice is found in a Saladoid site, then it is considered a cultural trait of all Saladoid people. This is the type of approach that Torres Etayo warned us about when he argued for the need to define what is an archaeological culture and to only define individual cultures from bottom to top.



*Explanatory Potential*

One of the main issues with the applications (or misapplications) of these concepts is how researchers perceive them. Concepts such as Taínoness and symbolic reservoir (and to some point Oliver's reconstruction of worldviews and cosmology) are not explanatory devices. They alone do not have explanatory potential and are not an end in and of themselves (see Oliver 2009 for his use of concepts such as syncretism and Maussian value theories to explain some aspects of Taínoness). Quoting McIntosh (1998: 16) again, "The idea of the symbolic reservoir is simply a device to focus investigation on the mechanisms by which certain defining symbols or beliefs undergo constant reinvention over the centuries, always welling up from a deep fount of core values." Indeed, one can say that Taínoness and symbolic reservoir developed from multiethnic interaction and that different groups made use of parts of them at different times or in different regions. Yet this just describes the historical trajectory and does not explain the historical, social, political, and other types of processes that led to those decisions. It is not until these concepts are applied to answer specific questions at the right scales and levels of analysis that their explanatory potential will be realized. What kind of interactions were involved in the development of the spectrum or the reservoir and between whom? What particular ideological elements are included and why? Why are some ideological elements emphasized in one region or in a period more than others? What were the social and political conditions that led to that decision, and how were the symbols adopted within this panorama? Who made those decisions? Who was affected by the decisions? To answer many of these questions, the analysis has to be made on smaller scales and at lower levels of analysis. To further demonstrate this point, I present here a few concrete examples.

As mentioned, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola show significant differences in the archaeological record despite the fact of being considered by Rouse and many others as classic Taíno (or Chican Ostionoid subseries). There is no doubt that both islands show significant similarities, especially in the ceramics and ceremonial and religious material culture discussed above (see Oliver 2008, 2009 for a discussion and possible explanation of these similarities). However, some inter- and intra-island variability can also be observed. For example, using Rouse's concepts and model, different ceramic styles can be found in eastern and western Puerto Rico and eastern and western Hispaniola. Furthermore, the ceramic assemblages of Puerto Rico include plates, which are rare in Hispaniola, while examples of bottles are present in the latter but not in the former. These differences are clearly linked to serving ceramic vessels, and it is possible that they may be related to differences in the symbolisms (and their meanings) involved in commen-

sal ceremonies, which included large consumption of food and beverages (e.g., corn or manioc beer), such as in feasting. Of course, the differences may also be related to the types of food and beverages being served in either daily, domestic meals or larger rituals. Yet even in this situation, it can be argued that differences between islands are an indication of symbols and meanings being manipulated differently for a number of possible reasons, including as markers of some form of identity or that they are related to the meaning or importance of the ritual activity within the mythical structure of each group. Regardless of the explanation, both cases are clear examples of the selection of symbols and the meanings being assigned to them by agents (either individuals, communities, or regional populations) according to the prevailing social and historical conditions. But the reasons one symbol was chosen over another and what roles the decision makers might have played socially or politically have yet to be determined. Moreover, we still need to ascertain what social and historical conditions motivated these agents in their choices.

A second example is related to idols and rituals. The cohoba ritual is one of the most important throughout most of the Greater Antilles. It involves the consumption of the hallucinogenic seed of *Piptadenia peregrina* in order to make contact with the supernatural. Early documents indicate that in some instances the ceremony was restricted to the cacique, priests, and nobility. This has been interpreted by many as an indication that the ritual was controlled, manipulated, and used by the elite to make their ideological claims over their privileged position (e.g., Curet 1992; Moscoso 1986; Oliver 2009). Among the paraphernalia used in these ceremonies were spatulae to induce vomiting during the cleansing process before the ceremony, inhalers to snuff the hallucinogenic powders, large idols topped with plates used to hold the powders, and ceremonial stools. Archaeologically, some of these paraphernalia are found in both Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, but the style and distribution of the artifacts vary. For example, the Hispaniolan vomit spatulae, inhalers, and duhos tend to be more elaborate in craftsmanship and are more common than those found in Puerto Rico, while no cohoba idol has been found in Puerto Rico to date. While evidence of the cohoba ritual found on both islands indicates some type of relationship and interaction, the differences in embellishment and commonness of the cohoba paraphernalia seem to suggest that their social and political role in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico differed. This strongly indicates that the social and historical processes were different on both islands and even in interisland regions.

The use of three-point idols is another example of ritual and symbolic objects that are present in both islands yet that present important inter-

island variation. Small versions of these artifacts are found in early sites in Puerto Rico, but sometime after AD 900 larger and more elaborate versions appear in the archaeological record. Although their meaning(s) and role in rituals and myths is not clear, interpretations of their meaning range from being related to agricultural fertility (Arrom 1975) to being part of a ritual complex that includes stone collars and elbow stones (Walker 1993), an interpretation that was expanded by Oliver (2009). Walker also suggests that, because of the observed increase in size through time, the role of these artifacts shifted from a household or individual setting to communal ceremonies.

Interestingly, stone collars and elbow stones identified by Walker (1993) as part of a ritual complex combined with the three-pointers are far more prevalent and sophisticated in Puerto Rico than in Hispaniola. This complex is practically nonexistent in most of the latter. So, contrary to the cohoba ceremony and paraphernalia, the three-pointers seem to be more common in Puerto Rico than in Hispaniola. If we accept Arrom's suggestion that these idols are related to rituals of fertility, then, in terms of their role in the sociopolitical structure, they probably had diacritically opposite meanings and function to the cohoba ritual and paraphernalia. Thus the evidence points to differences in social and historical processes that normally are concealed and, to a point, nonexistent when the term and concept of Taíno is used and when Taínoness or symbolic reservoir is applied uncritically as a descriptive device. Incidentally, since three-pointers and inhalers are found even during the early Ceramic age throughout the eastern Caribbean, they are good examples of symbolic reservoirs present before Taínoness and beyond the Greater Antilles.

A final example is the ceremonial architecture of the Greater Antilles, which consists mostly of ball courts and plazas. The presence of these structures has been known since early colonial times, when several of the chronicles mention ball games and courts and communal ceremonies. They have been identified archaeologically in Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Cuba, and, at least, the Virgin Islands. Puerto Rico is the island with most structures reported, followed by Hispaniola and Cuba. Most of the structures are built using stone rows, while a few others have earthen berms as boundaries. Most of the structures in Puerto Rico and eastern Hispaniola are made of stones in rectangular shape and relatively small, while in central Hispaniola they are round and large in size (e.g., 300 m in diameter), and in Cuba they are made of earthen berms, large and rectangular. Both ethnohistoric and archaeological data suggest that communal ceremonies and ball games were the main activities conducted in these structures.

The concepts of Taínoness and symbolic reservoir can be used in a

simple way to “explain” the similarities and differences of ceremonial architecture in the region. It is clear that many of the islands have at least a few examples of specialized, ceremonial structure and space. At the same time, they vary in number, construction materials, size, shape, and location between islands and even between regions in the same island. Thus this variability shows how this concept of ceremonial space has been adopted by many but not by all groups and manipulated, reinterpreted, and molded to the political and social interests of the actors. In other words, the similarity in structures and their accompanying paraphernalia is because these “symbols” belong to the same spectrum, but their differences are because different individuals, factions, or power groups have manipulated their uses, meanings, and functions within the sociopolitical structure differently.

Interestingly, along this line of thought, Oliver (2008) has recently proposed a possible explanation for these differences in ceremonial architecture. He identified the fact that in Puerto Rico most if not all petroglyph cemets in ceremonial centers are concentrated in the central plaza, whereas in many instances in the Dominican Republic (lacking monoliths), the petroglyphs are usually found outside the plaza, on an adjacent river pond, often with a pathway connecting the two. Clearly the spatial and social relationship between the cemet icons and the actors/agents in the Dominican Republic differ dramatically from that in Puerto Rico. This could be an example of how one particular item of the symbolic reservoir is used with different expressions on the ground as the result of different political manipulations or other historical processes.

While so far all of this sounds reasonable regarding the simultaneous presence of similarities and differences, in reality it does not explain anything. It is only describing that different processes were present in different regions. But what are those processes? What are the social, political, and historical conditions that triggered them? Who were the actors? Why were some symbols selected and not others? To go beyond the descriptive approach, there is a need to come up with more specific and detailed explanations. For example, contrary to what many of us have suggested in the past, the large number of structures and their widespread distribution in Puerto Rico seem to suggest a lack of centralization of power or decision-making authority (i.e., a competitive setting) (Curet and Torres 2010; Torres 2012). The wide accessibility of different regions and even of small sites for ceremonial structures indicates a weak power structure and suggests a continuous negotiation between different factions or groups. In central Hispaniola, the case is different. Here there are few structures present, but their great size indicates that the ceremonies likely involved a large number of participants. The scarcity and size of these structures seem to indicate a

more centralized form of control over the ceremonies and, possibly, over political and social power. Furthermore, these structures are not apt for the ball game, so the emphasis, contrary to the case of Puerto Rico, is on communal ceremonies such as dances. Therefore, it is by applying the concept of symbolic reservoir in a critical manner that we can come up with these types of critical questions that are key for directing our research to actually develop our true and real explanatory potentials.

### Summary and Conclusions

It is clear that significant similarities exist among the groups from most of the Greater Antilles, Bahamas, and the Virgin Islands at the time of contact. Many scholars and writers have used these similarities over the course of more than a hundred years to define the phenomenon that was called Taíno. This is explained by claiming that all Taíno groups descended from a common cultural ancestor and formed a “natural” unit. However, many of these arguments ignore and cannot explain the significant differences that existed among these groups. These similarities and differences between these people were not produced by common ancestry but by intense interaction between groups from different cultural backgrounds, which included, but were not limited to different Archaic societies and the Saladoid and other South American migrants (Chanlatte Baik 1986, 2000; Curet 2005; Rodríguez Ramos 2010, 2011). This interaction that was active for centuries produced one or more symbolic reservoirs that were shared, at least partially, by most of these societies and that were manipulated differently throughout the archipelago and history. Therefore, while interaction and transculturation between different groups may have produced some common cultural characteristics, symbols, and practices throughout the region (i.e., symbolic reservoir), the variability in use and meaning was shaped by agents with different agendas.

However, this does not imply that everyone in the Greater Antilles and Bahamas had the same belief system and symbolic reservoir. In the same way that many peoples interacted and exchanged symbols and ideas blurring the boundaries dividing different identities, others may have resisted and instead reinforced their identity by selecting their traditional or other symbols that differentiated them markedly from the others. Yet others may fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Furthermore, it is important to stress that, like the concept of Tainoness, the concept of symbolic reservoir is not passive but historically dynamic. The hypothetical cases mentioned above could occur all in the same location at different times according to the social and political situations and the agents that manipu-

late them. It has to be kept in mind that symbolic reservoirs are rooted and based on traditional and historically based symbols. In other words, they have to have some antecedents that make them meaningful to people. Nonetheless, this does not mean that these symbols will retain their original meaning, as this can shift according to the social and political conditions. Finally, we have to remember that Taíno-ness was most probably not the only symbolic reservoir developed in the ancient Caribbean. We should be expanding our research to identify, study, and explain similar symbolic spectra from other points in time and regions.

## Notes

A preliminary, shorter version of this paper was presented in the symposium titled “Indigenous Heritage of the Caribbean in Honor of Dr. Arie Boomert” at Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands. I am indebted to Corinne Hofman for inviting me to this symposium. I would like to express my gratitude to the following colleagues who provided illuminating and helpful comments in the preparation of this paper: William J. Pestle, José Oliver, Gabriel De La Luz, Reniel Rodríguez Ramos, Joshua Torres, Jalil Sued Badillo, Roberto Valcárcel Rojas, and three anonymous reviewers. I am grateful to Joshua Torres, who introduced me to the work of Africanists on symbolic reservoir and to two anonymous readers who brought to my attention (1) the recent scholarship dealing with similar issues among Arawak-speaking groups in South America in ways similar to those proposed in this paper and (2) the works of C. S. Peirce, whose relationship between object, sign, and interpretant mirrors my use of phenomenon, term, and concept.

- 1 It is important to mention here that the relationships between terms, concepts, and phenomena are, as one of the anonymous reviewers correctly pointed out, fluid, multivocal, and complex. However, here I treat them as (artificially) separate concepts. It is true that the relationship between these three “usages” of *taíno* by scholars and the general public can be complex. As a matter of fact, these three terms are analogous to the three semiotic concepts developed by C. S. Peirce (1868; see also Collins and Hoopes 1995; Darnton 1986; and Hoopes 1993): object, sign, and interpretant. In a nutshell, objects are “things” that are real; signs are representations of the object that have some real connection with the thing, and interpretants are the thoughts that interpret the sign as a representation of the object. The relationship among these three parts can be complex, especially between the interpretant and the other two parts, since many “interpreters” may be observing the same object represented by the same sign but come up with different interpretants. In the same way, my use of *phenomenon* refers to “real” facts that are named (term), but that can be interpreted or defined differently by various observers (interpretants). Of course, the three parts of the triad interact in more complex and complicated ways than are being portrayed here. When viewed from this perspective, it is easy to see how a term such as *taíno* can have a convoluted history and even more convoluted usage. In this article, however, for the sake of the argument, I decided to maintain the separateness of the three categories as best I could, but the reader is warned about the complexity of the issues involved.

- 2 In this article I capitalize *Taíno* when referring to its usage as an ethnonym or proper name (concept). The lowercased version, *taíno*, is used when referring to the term or the phenomenon.
- 3 For a lengthier list of scholars using the term, especially in Cuba, see Daniel Torres Etayo (2006) and Roberto Valcárcel Rojas (2008). For the use of the indigenous in Caribbean nationalistic movements, see L. Antonio Curet (2011), De La Luz (2011), Arlene Dávila (2001), Jorge Duany (2001), and Jalil Sued Badillo (1978).
- 4 According to Roberto Valcárcel Rojas (personal communication, 2011), the idea of the Taíno being the ancestor of modern Cuban culture or part of the national identity has not been well received by the general public of that island. In other words, popularly, it is used casually as an ancient culture (i.e., “the other”), and academically it is mostly used by scholars from various disciplines, especially anthropology, archaeology, and history.
- 5 The cases of the Niger and the Caribbean are not unique, and similar cases are being reported throughout the world where synchronical similarities and differences between cultural groups are observed. Interestingly, scholars from the various regions are developing theoretical approaches that are strikingly similar to the ones presented in this article. One of these cases is that of the Arawak groups of South America, who share some cultural traits (e.g., lack of endo-warfare) but at the same time show differences in other cultural aspects. To explain it, Fernando Santos-Granero (2002) developed the concept of Arawak Matrix, which is similar, but not exactly, to the concepts of Taínoness and symbolic reservoir. Alf Hornborg (2005) also has used ideas similar to the ones included here to propose that the Arawak case may have been produced not by mere generalized processes (i.e., migration and diffusion) at the level of the language family or cultures but by localized historical, social, economic, and political processes that involved intense interaction between multiple cultural groups. Examples of other scholars dealing with the Arawak phenomenon in similar ways can be found in Jonathan D. Hill and Santos-Granero (2002) and Hornborg and Hill (2011).

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