

# The Art of Headdress

Recently, I posted that an individual had asked me a question regarding Headdresses, the meanings of the colors, individual feathers etc. I was indeed pleasantly surprised as no one had ever asked me that question!

Sadly, in the Taino world there is a tendency to shoot first, never ask questions and attack mercilessly. I believe that this tendency is the key ingredient in the “rice n ass” mix we find ourselves in quite a lot of the time. I’m going to make this as long and boring as I can, in order to best convey my thoughts on what I consider to be very important aspect of our Indigeneity.

In 2013, I traveled to Kiskeya on a research trip. While visiting the sacred “Anacaona’s Stone” I was informed by the local caretaker that the last headdress maker in the region had died in 1958. Apparently there was a local tradition where a young girl was chosen who could best represent the ancient Cacike. The young woman had to be smart, poetic, brave and beautiful; supposedly, she had to have all the traits traditionally associated with the Cacike.

Upon hearing this, I set out to learn to make headdresses. I returned to the United States I immediately went to the local crafts store and bought as many materials as possible. Needless to say my first attempts were just slightly better than COMPLETELY HIDEOUS and I believe I am being really kind to myself! After a while I began to get the hang of it, But I was missing one stitch. One damn stitch, that’s all I needed, It was making me crazy! Picture #1 is of my first headdress in 2013 (sans the glue that the first ten attempts contained). Beautiful to look at, but it wouldn’t stand straight on my head!!



The answer to my dilemma came from a Boricua named Mr. Brandon Casul, who traded information with me and taught me that pesky and elusive stitch! Now I could finally start making headdress!!!.....but then the inevitable Epiphany visited my cranium..... you see, although I had worn a headdress or two in my time, I only did it ceremonially never ,ever for aesthetics. I had often seen some people that appeared to wear feathers just to “look more Indian”. In fact, the headdress tradition that had died out in the DR in 1958 was mostly for that reason only. So I found myself knowing that although I had the skill to construct a headdress, I did not know how to “MAKE” a headdress! What do they mean? Are they all the same? Is it appropriate to use the same headdress for all occasions? Are feathers used for their beauty or for their significance or perhaps for both? How, could I find out? I have always asked native friends questions like this in my never ending search for our Indigeneity. In my 25 years at the museum of the American Indian, I met native people from across the Western Hemisphere DAILY, always engaging them in conversation, letting them know about us TAINO, and asking them questions about the intricacies of their respective cultures. However this particular subject had never come up. I needed a plan....

First thing I did was begin, separating romanticism from tradition. A concept that is very important in my life. I understand that for some, the image of the “noble red” Indian on a horse riding off into the sunset with an eagle flying behind him and a wolf trotting on his side is provocative, causing all sorts of wonderful emotions. They make me sick however, Always has and always will. The realities one encounters across Indian country in the states and in native communities in Latin America, hardly resemble that euro-centric image of the vanishing Indian.

My second thought related to our North American cousins be they Plains Indians, Desert Indians , North or South Eastern Tribes or West Coast peoples, etc, they are simply not the same as Taino. Often I heard people policing our Taino world with the Do’s and Don’ts of Indian culture based on the spirituality and customs of North American Indians. The Plains Indian warbonnet for example is 100% different than one that may look similar from the Amazon. To think that they both represent the same is not very realistic. For example the war bonnet is worn only by the men (unless you’re a Kiowa Indian grandmother), each feather must be earned individually, in battle (or military service) and so on. That is in stark contrast to Amazonian peoples who get their feathers by :

- 1) hunting, or receiving them as gifts from the birds (when they molt). Hunted feathers have less spiritual energy than those harvested from live birds.
- 2) Everyone in the tribe is expected to wear headdress
- 3) Each individual will wear different headdress for different occasions. For example a Headdress worn during a wedding ceremony will never be used during a medicine ceremony, etc etc
- 4) Why? Because our brothers and sisters of the Circum Caribbean believe that each feather contains “DUA” which is Spiritual energy. This concept is remarkably similar to CEMI.
- 5) When one puts on a headdress he is “ENHANCING” his/her DUA
- 6) The feathers are valued by their origin on the bird.

Simply, a South American headdress is only similar to a North American one due to them both being made of feathers, the traditions and purposes are indeed vastly different. This brings me to my second and MOST IMPORTANT TEACHER, Juan Fernandes Pataxo, who taught me the essence of headdress. The Pataxo is the name of his tribe btw. Juan taught me things I could not have found in books. For him knowledge is to be shared. I found the Pataxo to be very similar to Taino.

## COLORS

As some of you know, I have been researching Surviving Taino Spirituality via traditions I was introduced to in San Juan de La Maguana, Dominican Republic. I use the works of C.H. de Goeje, who along with his team of ethnographers studied and faithfully recorded the traditions of the Arawak and Carib peoples of Guyana and Adjacent countries. One of the most startling connections I have made is that of the meanings of Colors. In Maguana, as in South America, Stones and Water are integral parts to the spirituality and different colors are associated with different aspects be they feelings or things.

- A) Red represents life (as in blood)
- B) Blue represents water
- C) Black is power
- D) Green represents people
- E) Brown Earth
- F) Yellow represents light
- G) White represents peace

These meanings may change from tribe to tribe or even from village to village. In addition, these colors have other associations as well. Too many to get into for this short article.

### Feathers

Feathers are collected depending on the type of bird, feather type and color. Of the thousands of species of birds in the Amazon, only 54 species are used in the making of a headdress. The different styles of headdress represent different uses such as weddings, names changes, tribal identification, etc

This headdress below is “halo” style, used by men and women, it represents the tribe. Different groups have different patterns; this is how they know which tribe each person belongs to



This one is a crown headdress which often denotes Status. Often connected to a tribes particular cosmology, for example if a certain tribe focuses on the PLEIDES (as Taino once and still do) then 7 feathers are placed in the center to represent that star system. The rest of the feathers represent the “people”.



And of course we have this style, which some think is similar to a North American Plains Indian War bonnet , but in reality nothing could be farther from the truth. This style of headdress changes meaning depending on the type of feathers used (actually they all do) so if one of these is made of Harpy Eagle, it is unquestionably for medicine ceremony (and that is as far as I can go with that description) If it is made of Turkey or parrot, then it can be used to show off (yes, sometimes headdress are used just for the sake of being flamboyant)! This is a traditional fact.





One particular style of headdress are the style that are layered (left picture) Although I learned to make these from a man named Juan de Orellana, I did not adopt this style into our own Higuayagua group because the layered feathers reflect the HUNTING SEASONS, thus the black feathers represent the birds they hunt during one season, the red another, and so on. Thus this is a hunters headdress. As I am not a hunter, I respect our relatives who still hunt and fish for a living. It's a beautiful style, actually pretty easy to make, but one I do not feel worthy of using.

### What do the feathers mean?

When a headdress is put together the arrangement of the feathers which is tribally specific, tells the entire story of what the headdress is conveying. Headdresses look beautiful by chance and cultural significance. In other words, they are never meant to be artistic (as most native people will tell you). In most Amazonian societies the meanings of the colors and individual feathers is remarkably similar. As I mentioned earlier, in order for me to learn HEADDRESS I asked people who know, people who shared, some traditional, while others on the same quest as Taino, relearning, recapturing our ancient traditions. Not all Indians were open to sharing. I interviewed 210 individuals. Of these 15 told me to go away ! (true story) 15 ignored me, 20 were sympathetic but could not or would not share, 10 were very curious and told me bits here and there. Amazingly 150 of them shared with me.

My first question to them was:

Q. What do headdress mean to you?

A. From all of them.....headdress is Beauty, LOVE, HONOR, RESPECT, UNDERSTANDING, CONNECTION, POWER.

Q. Why wear them?

A. Your spiritual energy connects with the forces around you via the headdress. It enhances your energy.

Q. Are headdress earned?

A. Some are earned, some are expected from the individual tribal member.

Earned headdress almost always have to do with Status (chiefs, medicine people) some are gifted such as a Headdress given when one receives a new name

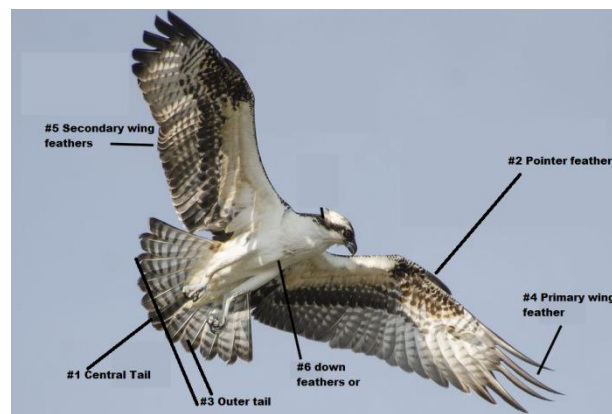
Q: how many feathers are used?

A: The amount of feathers is determined by the size of the feather and the style of headdress. Usually 35 -40 on each side of the head, not counting the 7 central feathers (important)

This picture below is on an Osprey, but like all birds , their feathers are similar.

- 1) The most powerful feather on a bird is the Central Tail feather. This feather is usually worn by Medicine people or by Cacike. This is #1

- 2) The second most powerful feather is the Pointer Feather. This one is always used by Cacike. Usually only used to stabilize a headdress central feather. Thus if you make a headdress with say ALL Pointer feathers, it is implying a lot of power, an honor like that is bestowed by others not by oneself. #2
- 3) Outer Tail feathers are used towards the back of the headdress. The headdress is in effect trying to recreate the bird. #3
- 4) The primary wing, feather is also for Status. Below Cacike and Behike #4
- 5) Wing feathers, are most often connected to the stars (specific tribal cosmology) and represents the People of said tribe. #5
- 6) #6 are the down feathers, used in decoration, especially COIRO (arm and Leg Bands)



Since my initial exploration of headdress I have learned some 6 different stitches, I called my first stitch the URURU stitch in honor of the dude who taught me, but I no longer use that stitch because I learned since then that the stitch also tells a story. That story was bitter sweet. But in true native fashion with nothing but good will, the *Juan Fernandes Pataxo stitch* is my favorite stitch as it tells a story which reveals the path and meaning of the sinew (tough fibrous tissue uniting muscle to bone or bone to bone) of a bird. The thread used in making the headdress mimics the sinew. The bonding of the sinew speaks of the bonding of the people.

Very important: The feathers must match as MUCH AS POSSIBLE between the left and the right side if your 10<sup>th</sup> feather on the left side is blue for example, then your tenth feather on the right must be identical. Balance in nature, and among the people is of great importance.

So, in conclusion (my apologies I put this together very fast)

Q: Who can wear a headdress?

A: Well Native people who belong to a collective be that a community, tribe or cultural group can.

Q: Can Non Indians wear a headdress?

A: YES as long as it is not one connected to Indian culture..... that is my personal bias. At the Museum I have headdress that have NO spiritual or cultural meaning. I use them to teach a point to non-Indigenous people. I let them try it on, take a picture and then remind them that although I let them borrow my hat (that's what a headdress is)for that moment, for them to go out and get one to "play Indian" is wrong, it is cultural appropriation, especially when my lesson was "this is how we feel

when we have them on, its not a chicken on my head". Doesn't mean you can now go on and make one and play what you are not.

**Q: Can Indian people not connected use them?**

**A: Certainly, what is important is that the headdress that one uses in a ceremony, should not be used say to dance at a pow-wow, or publically. Often I see people using them in this fashion, it bothers me..... but I mind my business. I realize that attacking them is non-productive and approaching them with advice may appear as though one is trying to be *MORE INDIAN THAN THOU* ....and I don't play that. In fact I have tried to guide a few people not connected with me and felt afterward that perhaps it was not my place to advise, as my "help" was not requested. Sometimes concern comes across as snobbish. So to each his own and may Creator and our Ancestors be our judges and not our fellow men and women.**

**In conclusion, as you can see there is a lot to a headdress, this report, covers very little of what truly goes on in the art of headdress. I prefer to explain what I have learned while physically teaching someone how to make one.**

**Anhan Catu**