

Taíno People & Culture



Taíno (good people), were seafaring indigenous peoples of the Bahamas, Greater Antilles, and the northern Lesser Antilles. They were one of the Arawak peoples of South America, and the Taíno language was a member of the Arawakan language family of northern South America.

At the time of Columbus' arrival in 1492, there were five Taíno chiefdoms and territories on Hispaniola (modern-day Dominican Republic and Haiti), each led by a principal Cacique (chieftain), to whom tribute was paid. Ayiti ("land of high mountains") was the indigenous Taíno name for the entire island of Hispaniola, which has kept its name as it is used as the Haitian Creole form for Haiti.

Cuba, the largest island on the Antilles, was originally divided into 29 chiefdoms. Most of the native settlements later became the site of Spanish colonial cities retaining the original Taíno names, for instance; Havana, Batabanó, Camagüey, Baracoa and Bayamo. The name Cuba comes from the Taíno language; however the exact meaning of the name is unclear but it may be translated either as "where fertile land is abundant" (cubao), or "great place" (coabana).

Puerto Rico also was divided into chiefdoms. As the hereditary head chief of Taíno tribes, the cacique was paid significant tribute. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the largest Taíno population centers may have contained over 3,000 people each.

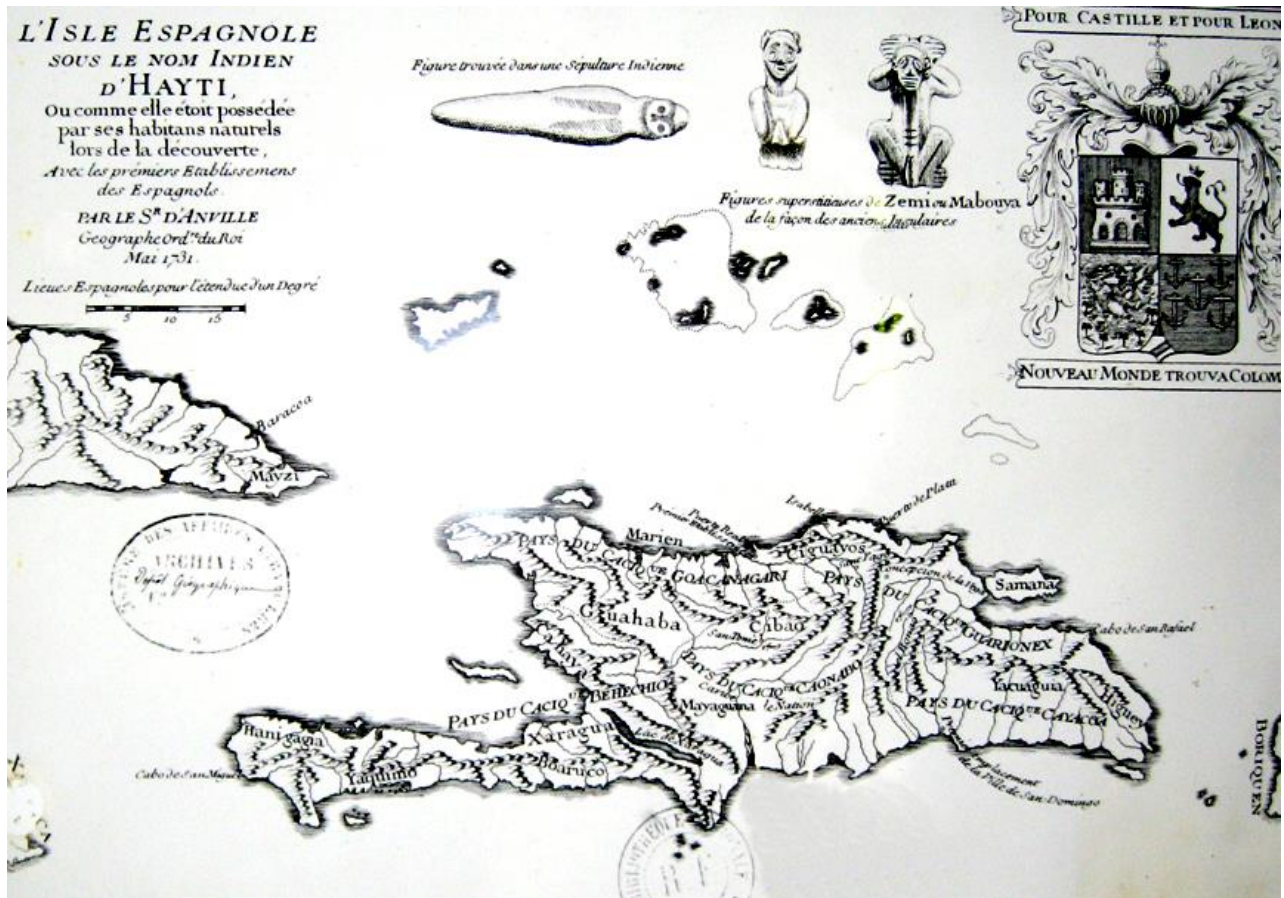
The Taíno were historically enemies of the neighboring Carib tribes, another group with origins in South America, who lived principally in the Lesser Antilles. The relationship between the two groups has been the subject of much study. For much of the 15th century, the Taíno tribe was being driven to the northeast in the Caribbean (out of what is now South America) because of raids by the Carib. Women were taken as captives, resulting in many Carib women speaking Taíno.

The Spaniards, who first arrived in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Hispaniola in 1492, and later in Puerto Rico, did not bring women in the first expeditions. They took Taíno women for their

common-law wives, resulting in mestizo children. Sexual violence in Haiti with the Taíno women by the Spanish was also common. Scholars suggest there was substantial mestizaje (racial and cultural mixing) in Cuba, as well, and several Indian pueblos that survived into the 19th century.

The Taíno became extinct as a culture following settlement by Spanish colonists, primarily due to infectious diseases to which they had no immunity. The first recorded smallpox outbreak in Hispaniola occurred in December 1518 or January 1519. The 1518 smallpox epidemic killed 90% of the natives who had not already perished. Warfare and harsh enslavement by the colonists had also caused many deaths. By 1548, the native population had declined to fewer than 500.

Maps



Map of the island named Hayti by indigenous people themselves. This name was recorded by Christopher Columbus and it means “Highland”. The island had been inhabited since 8000 years ago. Over this long span of time the culture was changing constantly: groups of people migrated into the territory from the surrounding mainland. Varied forms of economies, political and social organizations developed as a consequence.



Culture

Music

Music played a very significant role in the everyday life and also in daily rituals. The Taíno used the music to recall and to recount their history, for celebrations and special events, and to communicate with their spiritual guides, their zemís to cure illnesses, for protection against them and endeavor storms from Mother Nature.

Taíno also used their music to have rain when they needed good crops, to hunt, and to fish. In fact, their music had such a large importance that one of the most valuable gifts that a Taíno could offer to another was a song.

We can only guess on the form of the music of the Taíno because the Spanish columnists did not leave many details. We do know however that the music of the natives of the Taíno in general is typically very simple and monophonic; that means that contains a single line, that descends in its tone.

Generally there was not much harmony in the music of the natives Taíno although often there are songs among a leader or soloist and a chorus which means that the chorus sings in the same melodic line. Apparently that was the case among the Taíno , because the Spanish columnists wrote that they had leaders who sung with a repeating chorus.

Symbols

Taino artwork richly unifies a wide variety of symbology from documented historical sites throughout the Caribbean.



Trigonolito

Yocahu Vaguada Maorocoti: God of fertility. "Spirit of the Yucca and the sea. Mr yucador. " He was buried in the conucos cassava; main food of the native Taino, to fertilize the soil.



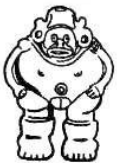
Potiza

Container used by the Aborigines of Quisqueyana to store water and fermenting the wine produced with the juice of Guáyiga. They were bought by women to men as a declaration of love



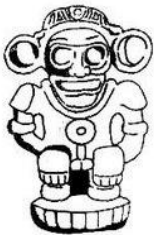
God of Labour

Recreation brothers Guillen, based on Taino art. The potiza carrying on his back, representing the hard work you were subjected aboriginal Americans as a result of conquest.



Itiva Tahuvava

Goddess Mother Earth. Mother of twins representing the four cardinal points or "the four winds."



Behique

"Witch Doctor", Shaman. It represents the wisest character in the Taino tribe, knowing all the plants and medicinal substances responsible for curing diseases, director of the rite of cohoba. If left to a dying patient, the relatives of the dead killed clobbered.



Cemi Boinayel

God of Rain. Large tears emerging from their eyes as a sign of water that will govern the field to fertilize the cultivation of cassava.



Majador

Hand mortar used for rituals in the spraying of the ingredients of cohoba (seeds, shells, leaves).



Dimivan Caracaracol

"Mr Roñoso." Unico child with the name of Mother Earth goddess. It represents a chieftain to which his brothers discovered a tumor, which operate and draw a turtle alive.



Moon Goddess

Sale of a cave of the country chieftain Mautiatibuel (son of dawn) or "Lord of the Dawn", which returns to hide, while the sun rises from there.



Maquetaurie Guava

Inhalers used by the Taino in the rite of cohoba for inhaling dust hallucinogen during the magical-religious ceremony.



Duho

Ceremonial seat used by warlords to preside over the ceremonies and rituals.



Totem

"God of Snuff." This figure was used as funerary urn for major characters and loved ones of the tribe.



Sun God

Sale of a cave of the country's chief Mautiatibuel (son of dawn) or "Lord of the Dawn", which returns to hide, while the moon comes out of there.



Cemi

It represents a god in the ceremonial position that took the chieftain or behique in the rite of cohoba.



God of force

Recreation brothers Guillen, based on Taino art. The trunk that rose, represents the willpower of the people for being free.



Mask

Representation of the face of characters and mystical animals or real world Taino.



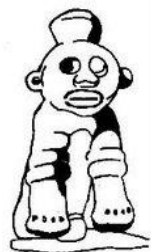
Glass Effigy

Glass antropomorfo sedentary, for his position, is known as the representation of "God's thinking." It was used to consume liquid at the ceremony of marriage.



Seal or Rattle

Part representing toad or turtle with geometric design subsection, used to make prints on clothing or skin.



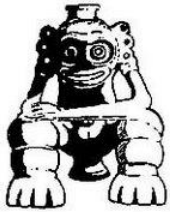
Opiyel Guobiran

God-dog, remained tied until the evening when it was released into the jungle. Its position suggests that it is ready to jump and escape to freedom.



Olla

Vessel used in cooking and for ceremonial occasions.



Cacique Marocael

Aboriginal that, according to mythology Taino, stand guard in a cave called cacibajagua; place where people came to populate the island. One day it took to reach his post and was turned into stone by the action of the sun.



God of Cohoba

Main deity Taíno. The plate of his head was used to move the dust that was inhaled hallucinogen in ceremonies religiosas (rite of cohoba).



Abundance

Recreation brother Guillen, based on Taino art. The container carrying in his hands is a symbol of prosperity and peace, which each man achieved as a result of work.

Daily Life

Lifestyle of Arawak / Taíno

The Arawak/Taíno society was basically a very gentle culture. It was characterized by happiness, friendliness and a highly organized hierarchical, paternal society, and a lack of guile.

Each society was a small kingdom and the leader was called a cacique. The cacique's function was to keep the welfare of the village by assigning daily work and making sure everyone got an equal share. The relatives of the caciques lived together in large houses in the center of the village. These houses reflect the warmth of the climate and simply used mud, straw and palm leaves. The houses did not contain much furniture. People slept in cotton hammocks or simply on mats of banana leaves. The general population lived in large circular buildings called bohios, constructed with wooden poles, woven straw, and palm leaves.

At the time of Columbus there were five different kingdoms on the island of Hispaniola. The Indians practiced polygamy. Most men had 2 or 3 wives, but the caciques had as many as 30. It was a great honor for a woman to be married to a cacique. Not only did she enjoy a materially superior lifestyle, but her children were held in high esteem.



Housing and Dress

The Arawak/Taíno used two primary architectural styles for their homes. The general population lived in circular buildings with poles providing the primary support and these were covered with woven straw and palm leaves. They were somewhat like North American teepees except rather than being covered with skins they needed to reflect the warmth of the climate and simply used straw and palm leaves.

The caciques were singled out for unique housing. Their houses were rectangular and even featured a small porch. Despite the difference in shape, and the considerably larger buildings, the same materials were used. When the Africans came beginning in 1507 they introduced mud and wattle as primary building materials. However, there is no record of the Arawak/Taíno having used these materials.

The house of the cacique contained only his own family. However, given the number of wives he might have, this constituted a huge family. The round houses of the common people were also large. Each one had about 10-15 men and their whole families. Thus any Arawak/Taíno home might house a hundred people.

The houses did not contain much furniture. People slept in cotton hammocks or simply on mats of banana leaves. They also made wooden chairs with woven seats, couches and built cradles for their children.

In addition to houses the typical Arawak/Taíno village contained a flat court in the center of the village which was used for ball games and various festivals, both religious and secular. Houses were around this court. This was a hierarchical society, and while there was only one cacique who was paid a tribute (tax) to oversee the village, there were other levels of sub-caciques, who

were not paid, but did hold positions of honor. They were liable for various services to the village and cacique.

Stone making was especially developed among the Arawak/Taíno , but they seem not to have used it at all in building houses. It was primarily used for tools and especially religious artifacts.

The men were generally naked, but the women sometimes wore short skirts. Men and women alike adorned their bodies with paint and shells and other decorations.

Food and Agriculture

The Arawak/Taíno diet, like ours, centered around meat or fish as the primary source of protein. There never were many wild animals to hunt on Hispaniola, but there were some small mammals which were hunted and enjoyed. They also ate snakes, various rodents, bats, worms, birds, in general any living things they could find with the exception of humans. They were able to hunt ducks and turtles in the lakes and sea. The costal natives relied heavily on fishing, and tended to eat their fish either raw or only partially cooked. Since they did grow cotton on the island, the natives had fishing nets made of cotton. The natives of the interior relied more on agriculture and de-emphasized meat or fish in their diet.

The Taíno had a developed system of agriculture which was environmentally friendly and almost maintenance free. They raised their crops in a conuco, a large mound which was devised especially for farming. They packed the conuco with leaves which improved drainage and protected it from soil erosion. One of the primary crops cultivated by the Taíno was cassava or yuca, which they ate as a flat bread. They also grew corn, squash, beans, peppers, sweet potatoes, yams, peanuts as well as tobacco.

(As an aside I would like to comment that many people in the pre-Columbian Americas had virtually work free agriculture. This system meant that people living in these materially simple social systems had enormous amounts of free time and often developed elaborate religious rites which took a lot of their time, but also had highly developed systems of games and recreation. There are some nice advantages to very simple living and diet!)

One of the Arawak/Taíno's primary crops was cassava. This is a root crop from which a poisonous juice must be squeezed. Then it is baked into a bread like slab. The current method of doing this in Haiti produces a flat bread, sort of like a stale burrito or pizza shell. The Arawak/Taíno grew corn (maize), squash, beans, peppers, sweet potatoes, yams and peanuts.

They not only had cotton, but they raised tobacco and enjoyed smoking very much. It was not only a part of their social life, but was used in religious ceremonies too.

Transportation

The Arawak/Taíno had no large animals like horses, oxen or mules to ride or use for work. But they did have river and sea transportation. They used dugout canoes which were cut from a single tree trunk and used with paddles. They could take 70-80 people in a single canoe and even

used them for long travels on the sea. These dugouts allowed fishing the few lakes of Hispaniola as well as fishing out a bit off the coast.

Defense

The Arawak/Taíno themselves were quite peaceful people, but they did have to defend themselves from the Caribs who were cannibals. The Caribs of this area were centered at what is today Puerto Rico, but some did live in northeast Hispaniola, an area that today is the Dominican Republic. The Caribs were war-like cannibals. They often raided the more peaceful Arawak/Taíno, killing off the men, stealing and holding the women for breeding, and fattening the children to eat.

Thus the Arawak/Taíno had some weapons which they used in defense. They used the bow and arrow, and had developed some poisons for their arrow tips. They had cotton ropes for defensive purposes and some spears with fish hooks on the end. Since there were hardwoods on the island, they did have a war club made of macana. This was about 1" thick and reminds one very much of the cocomaque stick used in later Haitian days. They did not develop any armor or specifically defensive weapons (shields, etc.).

Genocide

There is a great debate as to just how many Arawak/Taíno inhabited Hispaniola when Columbus landed in 1492. Some of the early Spanish historian/observers claimed there were as many as 3,000,000 to 4,000,000. These numbers seem to be based on very little reliable evidence and are thought to be gross exaggerations. However, since nothing like a census was done, the methods for estimating the numbers are extremely shaky, whether by these early historians or later critics.

One long technical article on the population comes in the with the low estimate of 100,000. Several other modern scholars seem to lean more forcefully in the area of 300,000 to 400,000. Whatever the number, what happened to them is extremely tragic. They were not immune to European diseases, especially smallpox, and the Spanish worked them unmercifully in the mines and fields. By 1507 the Spanish were settled and able to do a more reliable job of counting the Arawak/Taíno. It is generally agreed that by 1507 their numbers had shrunk to 60,000. By 1531 the number was down to 600. Today there are no easily discerned traces of the Arawak/Taíno at all except for some of the archaeological remains that have been found. Not only on Hispaniola, but also across the Windward Passage in Cuba, complete genocide was practiced on these natives.

Disease was a major cause of their demise. However, on Columbus' 2nd voyage he began to require a tribute from the Arawak/Taíno. They were expected to yield a certain quantity of gold per capita. Failing that each adult of 14 was required to submit 25lbs. of cotton. For those who could not produce the cotton either, there was a service requirement for them to work for the Spanish. This set the stage for a system of assigning the Arawak/Taíno to Spanish settlers as effective slave labor. This system contributed significantly to their genocide.