

# THE CIBONEY CULTURE COMPLEX IN CUBA: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Review of the literature concerning the Ciboney Culture Complex in Cuba, with emphasis on the different adaptive strategies to the surrounding ecosystem in which they flourished. Special attention is given to the geography of Western Cuba, where most of the Ciboney remains have been found, and to the ways this people exploited the marshes and coastal areas of this region. Two Ciboney sites are discussed in detail: Guayabo Blanco and Cayo Redondo.*

## RESUMEN

*Revisión de la literatura sobre el complejo cultural Ciboney en Cuba, con énfasis en las diferentes estrategias de adaptación al ecosistema dentro del cual florecieron. Se le da atención especial a la geografía del oeste de Cuba, donde se han localizado la mayoría de los restos de la cultura Ciboney descubiertos, y a las formas de explotación de los manglares y zonas costeras de la región que desarrollaron estos pueblos. Se discuten en detalle dos asentamientos Ciboney: Guayabo Blanco y Cayo Redondo.*

The purpose of this paper is to present the Ciboney culture complex in Cuba emphasizing its adaptive strategies to the physical environment within which it flourished. Special attention will be given to the geography of Western Cuba, where most of the Ciboney archaeological findings have been made, and to the ways in which the Ciboney exploited the marshes and coastal areas of this region.

By the time the Spanish arrived in America, the Ciboney were located in the peripheral areas on the West and South West of Cuba and on the South West portion of Hispaniola. Apparently, they had been forced to retreat to those areas by the arrival of more advanced groups such as the Sub Tainos and Tainos (Rouse, 1948 a, 501). They were maritime collectors and hunters of small mammals and lived in rock shelters and cave mouths as well open air camps near marshes and coasts (Harrington, 1921, II - 385-86). They were organized as independent bands of about 100 individuals each (Rouse, 1941, 50-52). Archaeological research has established that they lacked pottery and agriculture and made most of their tools and artifacts out of stone and the "strombus gigas" shell.

Various theories have been presented in an attempt to explain the presence of the Ciboney in Cuba. Most of them can be classified under two major theories: one which states that the Ciboney were originally from South America and either migrated or accidentally arrived in Cuba, and another which contends that they came from Florida.

Mark R. Harrington maintains that the Ciboney reached Cuba as a result of a series of migrations through the lesser and greater Antilles starting in South America (Rouse, 1960; 22). But Harrington's hypothesis lacks strong archaeological support because of lack of archaeological evidence of artifacts in the Lesser Antilles.

Cruxent and Rouse have pointed out that the Ciboney may have migrated from the island of Cubagua, in North East Venezuela, to Cuba. They have called attention to the similarities between the Ciboney of Cuba and the Manicuroid of Cubagua. These are the only two groups in the Antilles which used the gouge and the celt for making dug-out canoes. According to Febles, no archaeological evidence has been found to support this hypothesis, unless we assume that the trip was made without stops on the islands along the way. However, Callahan's (1990) mathematical model based on the winds and ocean currents leads him to conclude that direct migration from the mainland was more than possible.

Cosculluela, on the other hand, draws attention to the similarities between Ciboney implements and those found in the St. John River area in Florida. Both groups used very similar shell gouges and stone balls (Rouse, 1960).

A historian, Foner, argues that Indian groups from Florida migrated to Western Cuba under pressure from more advanced groups and gradually disseminated over the entire island. Later, he says, they were forced to retreat to the western area of the island by more developed groups which arrived in Cuba. Also, the swampy nature of the southern coast of Florida is geographically comparable to the western part of Cuba, and thus better suited to adaptation.

One possible way to evaluate the relative merits of these theories is to consider the likelihood of an emigration to Cuba from either Venezuela or Florida around the year 2,500 B.C. or earlier. Certainly the Ciboney must have come from somewhere and since it is known that they were already in Cuba around this period, the migration must have taken place around that time or even before (Rouse, 1966; 128).

Around the year 5,000 B.C. the Wisconsin glacier retreated, causing the sea to rise some 50 meters and creating new islands such as Trinidad, and producing climatic changes. One of the effects of those climatic changes was the extinction of Miocene and Pleistocene big game animals. As a consequence, big game hunters—defined as lithic Indians by Rouse—in the northern part of South America were forced to find other means of subsistence. Some groups may have settled in the coastal regions, where they became maritime collectors and small game hunters (these are identified by Rouse as archaic Indians). A similar process is believed to have occurred in the southern regions of North America. While in South America we find archaic Indians, those in Florida were still in the lithic stages. If either of the two hypotheses referred to above is correct, then it must have been from one of these groups that the Ciboney emerged.

In order to consider the possibility of successful migration from either Venezuela or Florida one must answer questions such as: Were these peoples familiar with navigation? To what extent the currents, winds, etc., could have favored travel to Cuba and other of the Greater Antilles? What could have motivated this migration?

It has been argued that the people of northern South America were able to build rafts and had some rudimentary knowledge of navigational techniques. Groups may have gone out to sea to fish and it is possible that one of these expeditions may have been pushed further out to sea by the wind and currents and washed onto the shores of Cuba (Rouse, 1960; p.22).

Some support for this hypothesis is yielded by the fact that Caribbean currents flow in the North West direction and would thus tend to carry a drifting raft in the direction of Cuba.

The same argument may be raised in support of the Florida migration hypothesis since the Trade Winds, blowing from the North-East direction facilitate navigation from Florida to Cuba.

It is possible that both hypotheses are partially correct. Archaeological data reveals similarities between the Ciboney and both the Manicuroid of Cubagua and the St. John River complex. Furthermore, the Ciboney culture complex in Cuba presents two aspects, the Guayabo Blanco and the Cayo Redondo, which differ in some respects from one another. It is conceivable that the two aspects may correspond to two groups of different origin but similar culture who later adapted in very much the same ways to the Western Cuban environment.

Cuba is the largest island in the West Indies with a total area of 44,218 sq. miles. It is part of a limestone platform that is separated from but structurally related to the limestone areas of the Yucatan peninsula, Florida and the Bahaman islands. Most of Cuba is lowlands with several important upland and mountain areas that increase in height from West to East. The waters are rougher on the Atlantic side making navigation preferable on the Caribbean side. It has a mild tropical climate since it lies on the north Torrid Zone, south of Florida.

Roughly half the perimeter of Cuba is protected by a screen of islands, reefs and banks. Although an inconvenience for navigation, this screen affords protection to crafts between it and the mainland. The southern coast is protected by the Archipielago Jardines from roughly the middle of the island to the Western tip. The portions of the coast protected by this archipelago are generally marshy and covered with thick growth of mangrove and other tropical swamp flora. Frequently, lakes of fresh and salt water are hidden inside this swamp areas. Caves are abundant in the western portion of the island.

The Ciboney apparently had a strong preference for marshlands and caves as places of settlement, even though they also inhabited drylands and hills. Talking about the Maniabon hills site, in North central Cuba, Rouse suggests that: "the sparsity of population in that area may have been due to the scarcity in that region of the marshes and caves which the Ciboney preferred as places of habitation" (Rouse, 1942; 134).

According to Marcio Veloz, the course of Antillean prehistory, from Trinidad to Cuba, is

dominated by the marshlands (M. Veloz 1976; 39-101). The marshlands, together with the nearby sea, provided a rich source of nourishment, especially protein, which the inhabitants of the Antilles thoroughly exploited. Big and small fish grow protected in the marshland (e. g. the "manjuari"). Mussels are abundant, since they reproduce at an early age and in great numbers in the protected environment of the swamp. Other edible animals, such as crabs, snails, turtles and lizards are also plentiful.

A study of Puerto Rican marshlands undertaken by M. Herbert and S. Austing, concluded that some marine animals like the Carcharhinidae shark, the Myliobatidae ray, *Sphyræna barracuda*, and many others, visited the swamp frequently. They were attracted there not only by the protection which the environment afforded, especially for the young ones, but also by the abundance of invertebrates and algae. According to Veloz, these conclusions drawn by Austing are likely to be applicable to the swamp areas in all of the Greater Antilles (M. Veloz, 1976; 287).

An important characteristic of the marshland ecology is its tendency to regenerate rapidly. Thus the marshlands provided a reliable, long-term source of abundant food for the Antillean Indians.

Besides the resources provided by the marshlands, the Cuban environment also presented other opportunities of which the Ciboney took advantage. Small animals such as the jutia and the almiqui were found almost everywhere on the island. Apparently, monkeys were also to be found at some time and there's some evidence suggesting that the Ciboney hunted them too. Other animals in the region were crocodiles, manatees, snakes and a great variety of birds. The flora is rich in tropical fruit trees (mamey, anon, guava, etc.) and edible roots.

With this description of the environmental setting of the Ciboney culture complex in mind, we are in a position to begin discussing the Ciboney economy.

As we have already said, the Ciboney were maritime collectors and hunters of small game. These activities were supplemented by fishing and gathering of wild tropical fruits and vegetables and edible roots.

It is known that by the time the Ciboney arrived in Cuba certain animals inhabited the island that were already extinct on the mainland. Some of these were the Almiqui (*Solenodon Cubanus*), four endemic forms of the "megalonyx" (megalognus), and the Pleistocene ground sloth. There is archaeological evidence showing that the Ciboney hunted these animals and it is believed that hunting contributed to their extinction on the Cuban habitat. In 1921, Harrington found bones of ground sloth and megalognus associated with artifacts of eight different sites. Alvarez Conde, referring to Harrington's findings, said that the bones were marked as if they had been cut by a man (Alvarez Conde, 1951).

According to E. Tavio, the Guayabo Blanco aspect had for its main economic activity the collection and fishing of marine animals, followed by the gathering of fruit and vegetables and the capture of land animals, in order of relative importance. Tavio bases his assertion on statistical data on the remains found at the Guayabo Blanco sites.

Regarding the Cayo Redondo aspect, Tavio points out that the relative importance of the various activities varies from site to site. In certain sites, jutia remains are more abundant than remains of marine creatures, whereas in other sites the pattern was reversed.

Tavio himself warns against accepting the statistical evidence as definite proof of the preponderance of some activities over others. He points out that, in certain areas, the chemical characteristics of the soil favor the conservation of some types of remains over others (E. Tavio, 1966; 81-83). Therefore, statistical variations need not accurately reflect the relative importance of different activities (e. g. collecting marine animals versus hunting small game).

Veloz has suggested several interesting hypotheses about the Ciboney way of exploiting the swamp and marshland ecology. They focus on the relationship between the rate of exploitation and the environment's rate of regeneration. If the former was slower than the latter, then the swamps and marshlands could have supported permanent settlements. If the converse were true, then two possible strategies may have been followed: 1) When the life-supporting ability of the environment ran dangerously low, the Indians would concentrate on hunting small game

and gathering wild fruits, vegetables and roots. In this way, they would allow the marshlands and swamps to regenerate in order to be able to return to them later. This would be sort of a cyclical pattern of exploitation of different environments. 2) The Indians might exploit only a part of the marsh and swamps while supplementing their diet with hunting and gathering. This implies a conscious policy of conservation of the marshlands and swamp areas. These would be divided in parcels not be exploited simultaneously so as to avoid endangering an important source of nutrition. Veloz points out that in the second case, the Ciboney Indians would be producers rather than mere collectors, since this form of behavior presupposes a more sophisticated knowledge of the marsh and swamp ecology and a conscious use of such knowledge.

The tools and implements found in both Guayabo Blanco and Cayo Redondo sites are chisels, scrapers, jars and alls made from fish bones, sea shells and rough wood used for various purposes including breaking open mollusks, building canoes and butchering hunted animals. Objects resembling spearheads have also been found and it is believed that they were used for hunting and/or spear fishing. Milling stones, mortars and varying types of gears were found at the sites also.

The Cayo Redondo aspect produced a greater quantity of stone implements. These, made of silex rocks, were in general the same as those of Guayabo Blanco, but more carefully crafted and of better quality. The Guayabo Blanco aspect evidences greater dexterity in the production of sea shell implements.

The Cayo Redondo sites have been found in the Western tip of Cuba, mainly in the Guanahacabibes peninsula. Cayo Redondo is an islet in a swamp lagoon on the north coast of the Guanahacabibes. Those of the Guayabo Blanco aspect are mostly in the periphery of the Ciénaga de Zapata. The Cayo Redondo sites are more numerous and generally bigger than those of those of Guayabo Blanco, which probably means that a larger population was associated with the former than with the latter.

Almost all the sites consist simply of deposits of refuse and are small and shallow. Large amounts of shell are found in the refuse, together with animal bones and artifacts. Burials have also been found among the refuse. Almost all the sites are places of habitation and are located near the shore, bays, streams and areas sheltered from the full force of the sea. The largest are near the swamps and on off-shore tiny islets. Also there are remains of sites occupied briefly by small independent bands, but no traces of dwellings or ceremonial structures have been found. It has been said that they probably constructed no more than the simplest windbreaker of bush and palm thatch (García Valdez, 1948, 504).

In the Guayabo Blanco area, along the south coast, there is a series of mounds in the marshes, called caneyes, measuring as much as 40 to 50 meters in diameter and three meters high. Some are composed only of shell refuse, others consist of alternate layers of earth and refuse which have apparently been artificially constructed. They could be burial mounds or places of habitation (Rouse, 1956).

Based on the archaeological data, some deductions have been made concerning the Ciboney settlement patterns. It is believed that they were semipermanent settlers and lived in bands of about 100 people integrated by a group of families (Rouse, 1941; 50-52). Tavio, however, believes that the larger bands, those of the Cayo Redondo aspect, consisted of no more than 80 persons. In this case, the ecosystem carrying capacity will not support human groups (hunter-gatherers) bigger than 100 individuals.

No definite statements can be made about the non material aspects of the Ciboney culture complex on the basis of archaeological data. However, certain characteristics of burials found at the site would seem to suggest that religious beliefs of some sort were held by these people. The dead were always buried with the head pointing to the East. In Cayo Redondo, they were also buried in the fetal position. There were primary and secondary burials and some collective burials as well. In Cayo Redondo, stone balls were found in burial places. It has been suggested that these stone balls were used for rituals and/or for some kinds of games of a ritual nature.

Pictographs depicting geometric forms have been found in some sites. Twenty such draw-

ings were found in a cave in Punta Este and it is believed that may have some religious, symbolic meaning.

It is known that the Ciboney didn't speak the Carib nor the Arawak languages. The very name Ciboney is probably an Arawak word and it is not known whether they called themselves by that name.

According to Las Casas, Columbus once caught a glimpse of a group of Ciboney and reported that they were naked. The finding of beads and other ornament-like objects in the sites suggests that they might have worn necklaces or other forms of adornment. Red and yellow ochre may have been used by them for coloring their bodies and faces, perhaps for ceremonial purposes.

The Ciboney were apparently the first inhabitants of Cuba. They probably originated in South America or Florida and migrated to the island before the year 2,500 B.C. Archaeological research has identified two aspects of the Ciboney culture complex; one at Cayo Redondo and the other at Guayabo Blanco.

Findings at the Guayabo Blanco and Cayo Redondo sites indicated that the Ciboney way of life, especially the Ciboney economy, was adapted to the marshland and swamp ecology. They exploited the food resources available in that environment and used the materials available in it, mainly shells and fish bones, for the fabrication of tools and artifacts. Hunting of small game and gathering of fruits, vegetables and edible roots in the neighborhood of the marshlands were also important economic activities.

Little is known about their non material culture, but they seem to have had some religious ideas, as evidenced by their burial practices.

Unfortunately, the Spanish chroniclers, who told us so much about the Tainos and Caribs, didn't pay much attention to the Ciboney, for whatever reasons. Thus, our hopes of learning more about them rest upon the good fortune of archaeologists engaged in further research on the Ciboney culture complex.

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