CULTURAL PLURALISM AND THE EMERGENCE
OF COMPLEX SOCIETY IN THE GREATER ANTILLES

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INTRODUCTION

It has been recognized since the 16th Century that the indigenous people of the Caribbean had cultural ties to lowland South America. Saladoid culture emerged from South American roots, with ties to cultural relatives in the Orinoco and Amazon basins and in the Guianas. A nearly two-thousand-year history linked the Taíno we know from historical accounts to their distant ancestors who first left the mainland for the islands, and archaeologists can with some confidence trace material and stylistic continuities from 500 B.C. to 1500 A.D.

Taíno culture, however, for all its parallels with South American and other circum-Caribbean groups, is extraordinary and unique, and there are many aspects of Taíno culture that cannot be traced to South America. Although the ball game is played in Central and South America, its key role in Taíno political and social practices was distinctive (Alegría 1983). The institution of Taíno caciques, in which males wielded political power on behalf of powerful matriline, was comparable to other lowland matrilineal societies, yet in many ways more variable in form and complex. The sorts of artifacts associated with both the ball game and political power – especially the elaborate stone carving – is unique in the world. The spectacular creativity that many lowland craftspeople expressed in basketry and feathers was conveyed by Taíno craftspeople in stone and very hard wood.

The Taíno world was also culturally and linguistically diverse. On the island of Hispaniola, three or more languages were spoken and indigenous people referred to one another using names that seem to connote ethnic difference. The differences are greater between Hispaniola and the other islands – Cuba, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Puerto Rico – even though archaeologically we would probably consider all or most of these people “Taíno.” I have argued elsewhere that we might view the prehistoric Caribbean, including the Greater Antilles, as a cultural mosaic of different groups (Wilson 1993).

The two islands where Taíno political systems were the most complex and where Taíno expressive culture reached its most elaborate extremes were Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. There, the Taíno created new and innovative kinds of artifacts in new media, and in a sense used design rules that departed dramatically from those of South America. In their expressive culture, and it appears in all parts of social and political life as well, they showed the kind of exuberance that characterizes the Taíno fluorescence.
This paper argues that Taïno culture is the result of the historic conjunction of people with very different ancestries, and that Taïno roots extend both through Saladoid times to the South American mainland, and through the Archaic or Casimiroid traditions back to Central America as well. Because of the more conspicuous continuities in material culture and economy, the tendency has been to emphasize the Saladoid antecedents to the Taïno, but on Hispaniola, the Taïno can be seen to be the product of the interaction and synthesis of the Archaic people who had lived on the islands for four millennia, with the more recently arrived Saladoid people. It is thus argued that the cultural pluralism in the Greater Antilles in the first millennium A.D. is a key factor in understanding the emergence of the Taïno chiefdoms. The Taïno chiefdoms began to develop rapidly in the centuries after A.D. 600, at the time of the most intensive cultural interaction and change. Populations were growing very rapidly, providing the numbers of people for new migrations and for larger, denser populations on Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. Permanent villages were being established in the highlands of Puerto Rico, the southern plains and central valley of the Dominican Republic, and beyond to the west. Cuba saw this sort of village development, and Jamaica and the Bahamas were beginning to be colonized. The first ball courts were being built and independent villages were coalescing into larger political units.

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Ostionoid ceramics came into use across most regions in the Greater Antilles around 600 A.D., but the causes for this change, and the relationship between Ostionoid and Archaic peoples, are not well understood. Most have considered the Ostionoid expansion to represent a wave of migration. Rouse (1992:96) notes:

The Ostionan expansion was obviously a population movement, for it resulted in the displacement of the previous Casimiran population. Jamaica may be an exception; because no Casimiroid remains have been found there, the Ostionans would appear to have been the original settlers of that island.

In Hispaniola, however, one regional variant of the Ostionan series of ceramics — the Meillacan or Mellacoide – seems markedly different from other kinds. In Los Modos de Vida Mellacoides (1981: 309-310) Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, Elpidio Ortega, and Angel Caba Fuentes comment,

"It is evident that [the Mellacoide] do not appear, from the point of view of ceramic decorations, to have precedents either in the island of Santo Domingo nor in the Antilles, in contrast with the Ostionoid ceramics which appear to result from Saladoid forms, or as can be seen with the Chicoid ceramics whose decorative patterns are present in Saladoid and Barrancoid pottery from eastern Venezuela.

In other words, the presumed movement of Ostionoid migrants from Puerto Rico underwent some sort of change in the Cibao Valley of the Dominican Republic. The regional pottery variant there, the Meillacan or Mellacoide, exhibited design elements that could not be traced to Saladoid forms. Veloz Maggiolo et al. were forced to look outside the Greater Antilles for this influence:

Not having evidence for local evolution, nor connecting archaeological evidence in all of the Antillean arc, we must suppose that the Mellacoide ceramics are the result of a prehistoric migration that came into the island of Santo Domingo and affixed their decorative patterns on to a well elaborated Ostionoid ceramic medium – that which was the product of farmers with segmentary organization who accepted the fusion of a new ethnic group, generating a rapid change in their settlement pattern and conception of the environment (Veloz Maggiolo et al. 1981: 309-310).

In the nearly 20 years since that was written, evidence has not accumulated for another migration to the Caribbean. Also, in both the writings of Veloz Maggiolo and Rouse there has been more emphasis on the importance of processes of transculturation, and both have entertained another solution to this problem. That solution, which is favored here, is that the substantial changes reflected in Mellacoide ceramics, other technology, settlement patterns, and economy, is evidence for the cultural synthesis of Ostionoid people and ideas with the Archaic people who had been living on Hispaniola for over 4000 years. The Mellacoide people reflect the integration of Archaic and Ostionoid peoples,
and their way of life retains a great deal of the Archaic relationship with the land. At the sites investigated by Veloz, Ortega, and Caba Fuentes the Mellacoide ceramics are found in use alongside the lithics and ground stone implements characteristic of the Casimiroid series.

The Meillacan ceramics might be based on preexisting design ideas and artifacts that have not survived. Many of the Meillacan ceramics design motifs resemble basketry, and perhaps these ceramics are the expression in a new medium of forms and designs that formerly had been made in perishable materials.

These Casimiroid or Archaic people of the Greater Antilles were themselves culturally diverse, and the product of multiple migrations, cultural interaction, and changes in the past. The first people to move into the Greater Antilles probably came from the west, from Central America, around 4,000 B.C. (Wilson, Iceland, and Hester 1998). The macroblade-based assemblages of the Yucatan peninsula are directly comparable to those from sites such as Levisa, Seboruco, Barrera-Mordán and Casimira. For around 2,000 years, they appear to have lived by themselves on Cuba and Hispaniola. After 2,000 B.C. the cultural geography of the Caribbean begins to get more complex, with two or more additional groups occupying the islands. As Veloz Maggiolo described the situation in Las Sociedades Arcaicas de Santo Domingo (1980: 68),

Archaeologists have been able to determine... that at around 1,800 B.C. there were places in the island of Santo Domingo and on Antigua, in which there appear elements of the three [economic] schemes just mentioned; that is, in the same site there were chert artifacts equivalent to those from Barrera - Mordán, together with tools or artifacts that follow the form of El Porvenir, as well as conch tools similar to the groups at La Isleta. The evidence that the people of the three schemes came into contact a little after 2,000 B.C. is given in our book Medioambiente y Adaptación Humana in la Prehistoria de Santo Domingo...

Ortega and Guerrero (1985) have referred to assemblages from this time as “hibridoide,” capturing the complexity of cultural change and combination that was taking place. We might view much of the late aceramic period in the Caribbean as “hibridoide,” and in some cases we can see foreshadowing of some aspects of Taíno material culture.

The later aceramic period is not well known from the Lesser Antilles, but in the centuries before the Saladoid forays into the islands, there appears to have been contact and trade all through the islands (Veloz and Vega 1982). When Saladoid people moved to the eastern end of Santo Domingo in the first centuries A.D., they were met, and probably stopped from proceeding further, by Archaic people living there.

The interactions between Saladoid people and the long-time inhabitants of Hispaniola have been discussed by many scholars. Some artifacts, such as the “Cap Rouge” stone bowl (Langworthy 1990) and El Caimito ceramics (Veloz Maggiolo et al. 1974; Rouse 1989, 1992) have been examined as possible instances of Archaic people adopting ideas about material culture from the ceramics-using people. Sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 600 — the dating of this period of interaction is not secure — there was a long time in which Saladoid and Archaic people were living near each other and interacting to some degree. Of the many periods of culture contact and change in the Caribbean, this is one of the most interesting and deserving of additional research.

After 600 A.D., and in the Cibao valley after 800 A.D. or so, there is a dramatic change in the archaeological characteristics of the island. Ostionoid, Meillacan, and Chican sites are found in great density in the parts of Hispaniola that were most suitable for horticultural development. The colonization of the Bahamas began at this time and Ostionoid and Mellacoide ceramics came into use on Cuba. Populations were apparently growing rapidly and more intensive horticultural practices came into use. On both Puerto Rico and Hispaniola ball courts were built and these constructions and other archaeological evidence attests to the emergence of more complex social and political institutions than had existed in Saladoid times.
Where Meillacan pottery came into use, it is important to note that in many places, the earlier artifacts of the Casimiran assemblages do not disappear, but remain in use alongside the Meillacan pottery. As Veloz Maggiolo and his colleagues note (1981) Mellacoide economic practices and settlement patterns were very different from the Saladoid ways, and more similar to the Archaic practices and patterns that had been in place on Hispaniola for more than four millennia. A similar pattern can be seen at sites such as Arroyo del Palo on Cuba (Tabío and Guarch), where Casimiroid tools were used alongside Meillican pottery.

In various parts of Hispaniola, different pottery styles came into use. As noted earlier, Mellacoide pottery is found primarily (though not exclusively) in the large interior valley of the north and in the western part of the island. Chican pottery was used primarily in the southeast, and later became more widespread. It should be stressed that the relationship between Ostionan, Meillacan, and Chican pottery is not a sequential one. Instead, the three related kinds of pottery were in use at the same time on various parts of the island. Meillacan pottery and later pottery that shows its strong influence, was used until the time of the European conquest of the island.

Bernardo Vega, in Los Cacicazgos de la Hispaniola (1980) suggested a possible way of connecting the archaeological record to the ethnohistoric chronicles written by the Spanish. He posited the connection between Mellacoide pottery and the historic Macorix people of northwestern Hispaniola. The Macorix were viewed by the Spanish as being very different from the people they had been dealing with in the central valley of Cibao. They remarked that the Macorix were different in language, hair style, body painting, the use of bows and arrows, and in other ways (Wilson 1990). Veloz Maggiolo et al. (1981: 344-346) concur that the historical Macorix people were probably descended from the makers of Mellacoide pottery, but also made it clear that this did not mean that every maker of Mellacoide pottery, in Haiti and Cuba for instance, was ethnically Macorix as well.

The quite plausible association of Mellacoide pottery with the Macorix offers additional evidence for cultural diversity among the Taíno. Las Casas commented on the Macorix and this linguistic diversity in particular:

There were three distinct languages in this island, which were mutually unintelligible: the first was of the people we called the Lower Macorix, and the other of the people of Upper Macorix . . . . The other language was the universal one for all of the land, and was the most elegant and contained the most words, and was the most sweet in sound. Of the latter the speech of Xaragú, as I have said earlier, carried the greatest prestige and was the main dialect (Las Casas 1967: Lib. III, Cap. CXXVII, II:311).

A final interesting suggestion that the makers of Mellacoide pottery may not have been of Saladoid ancestry comes from Julian Granberry’s paper, “Was Ciguayo a West Indian Hokan language?” (1991). Although he is very careful to make it clear that the paper is speculative and based on sparse linguistic data, Granberry finds closer linguistic relatives for Ciguayo among Central American languages — where it is thought the Casimiroid people came from — than in the Caribbean or northeastern South America.

My contention is that among the Taíno of the Greater Antilles there were fundamental and important ethnic differences, and that these differences arise from the Taíno’s dual ancestry. These differences have been masked by the relative similarity in material culture from place to place, and by the Europeans’ tendency to see all of the indigenous people as members of one or two groups, but the more we understand the situation in the Caribbean at the end of the 15th Century, the greater the depth and significance of these cultural differences seems to be. The lines of difference related to the degree of cultural inheritance from either Saladoid or Casimiroid ancestries, and it is likely that most people, especially on Hispaniola and west, were descended from both. The Taíno of Puerto Rico may have been more homogeneous in a cultural sense than the people of Hispaniola, agricultural groups had been on the island of Puerto Rico centuries longer, and probably without non-agricultural groups with which to contend. The differences between relatively homogeneous Puerto Rico, and relatively diverse Hispaniola, probably account for the differences in symbolic artifacts between the two islands that I mentioned above.
As we have seen from Dr. Shirley McGinnis’s presentation and dissertation, there are significant differences between the symbolic art of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. It is very difficult, as she notes, to be precise in drawing these distinctions, because we have to rely on the sample of artifacts collected, for the most part, by museums and collectors. But even in the most approximate terms, differences are apparent. Dr. McGinnis found a greater emphasis on the stone paraphernalia associated with the ball game on Puerto Rico. In her sample of over 2000 symbolic artifacts she had 128 ball collars on Puerto Rico and only 16 on Hispaniola (McGinnis 1997). Similarly, Alegría reported on 66 ball courts from Puerto Rico and only 26 on Hispaniola, even though Hispaniola is more than 8 times the size of Puerto Rico. This suggests that the ball game plays somewhat different social and political roles on the two islands.

**CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of the paper I raised the issue of the emergence of complex political institutions among the Taíno. Such institutions did not exist among the Archaic peoples, and probably not among the Saladoid people either. Yet evidence for the emergence of chiefdoms can be seen in the last centuries of the first millennium A.D., at just the time when horticulture, villages, and pottery were becoming widespread on Hispaniola. The prehistory of these early centuries of the proto-Taíno are very poorly known, but it is likely that it was a period of substantial competition among groups, and one in which patterns of Taíno warfare may have developed (Stevens-Arroyo 1986). In attempting to understand the origins of the Taíno cacicazgos, the multiethnic character of the societies involved is of crucial importance.

The Taíno emerged from a rich, multicultural mosaic of peoples with different backgrounds, languages and ethnicity, in circumstances not unlike those of the modern Caribbean. Such circumstance are conducive to experimentation and innovation in all kinds of human endeavors, including the arts, music, and statecraft. In such a context would-be leaders are not rewarded for conservatism, but for charisma and inclusive coalition-building. This helps to account for the flamboyant Taíno artistic styles, and for the rapid emergence of complex society.

**REFERENCES CITED**


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