PATTERNS, VARIATIONS, AND ANOMALIES IN IDEOGRAPHIC EXPRESSION IN THE PRECOLUMBIAN CARIBBEAN

Shirley Mc Ginnis

ABSTRACT
This research project sought patterns in the iconography of the Precolumbian Caribbean which might show that the ideographic expressiveness of the florescent Taíno developed out of a culture package carried from South America by their Saladoid ancestors. Taíno design similarities were found not only with artifacts of the Orinoco region of Venezuela but also with other areas of both South and Central America. These design relationships, or reflections, seemed to be most pronounced when hallucinogenic trance experience also was being expressed. Examination and comparison of Taíno artifact distribution attributed to Puerto Rico and Hispaniola discerned wide variations between types of artifacts. Dissimilarities of artifact types were most marked among those which were most expressive and complex. While this paper dwells specifically on artifact distribution patterns and the expressive designs incorporated in them, it also highlights some especially vivid visual images which suggest that very literal interpretations of ideographic messages may sometimes be valid.

INTRODUCTION
This paper presents an overview of some results from a recent intensive study of the shapes, images, and expressive designs of a large number of Caribbean artifacts. Although even careful examination and comparison of the images and expressive designs of Precolumbian Caribbean artifacts is a little like looking for faces in clouds, a number of resulting observations seem coherent and plausible.

Many interpretations of Caribbean artifacts have been suggested. I agree with most of them, only adding that they are not the end of the story. My findings suggest that more can be added to interpretations of, for example, shapes of the zemi tri-point cones which appear to change subtly to accord with the creature subject depicted; mythic symbolism expressed by designs on stone collars; bird symbolism; and especially the jaguar/dog/bat complex which seems to have allowed the Precolumbian inhabitants of the Caribbean to continue expressing ancient beliefs brought from the mainland.

Patterns in the iconography of the Precolumbian Caribbean show numerous expected and unexpected design connections with a culture package the Saladoid would have carried from South America. In addition to some expected Taíno design similarities with Venezuela, a few faint reflections of mainland mythology were encountered. An example is the jaguar face on the side of a stone head at Figure 1. Further, numerous ideographic suggestions on the stone collars of Puerto Rico surely reflect the watery world of the Orinoco Delta. Because there also is considerable evidence of Lower Central American influence on Western Caribbean images, I agree with those who say that some contacts occurred with that area. Temporal relationships, however, argue against direct diffusion, suggesting instead that an idea or motif which was important in Costa Rica or Panama at an early date might somehow have been echoed later in the Western Caribbean.

My survey of Precolumbian Caribbean artifacts counts and categorizes pieces I photographed as well as pieces I encountered in the “literature.” These counts are somewhat ephemeral as they draw from a body of artifacts of unknown dimensions. However, island attribution of stone artifacts is fairly reliable, so the marked differences in artifact distribution and creature emphasis evident between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico can still be considered significant. A comparison of these differences, with the social trends they suggest, is the principal subject of this paper.
OVERVIEW

Before looking closely at differences, two attributes common to both islands will help to establish a view of their basic relatedness. First, there is much evidence throughout the Precolumbian Caribbean of the importance of shamanic beliefs and practices. Artifacts from all the islands of the Caribbean incorporate entoptic symbols common to trance experience as has been discussed by David Friedel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker (1995); J. Lewis-Williams (1981, 1988); G. Reichel Dolmatoff (1971, 1985, 1987a); Janet Siskind (1973); David Whitley (1992); Johannes Wilbert (1987, 1993), and numerous others. Symbols and images throughout the area dramatically express a widely held belief that hallucinogenic trance allows transformation from one creature to another, and suggestions of transformation between human and animal forms also are common. Especially convincing are images of transformed or partially transformed humans floating, swimming, or flying. Most of these employ creatures in some way liminal as conceptualized in the works of Victor Turner (e.g. 1969:95-96). Peter Furst says of this, “. . . shamanic symbology . . . selects precisely those animals that can shift between different environments or that by virtue of unusual life histories or habits are perceived as mediators between disparate states . . . The bird motif . . . seems to stand for the power of flight that is the shaman’s special gift . . .” (Furst 1976:18-19). (See also Furst 1976:154; and Helms 1976, 1988, 1993.) I interpret the frequently used image of a bird on a human head as a literal symbol for a state of hallucinogenic trance. Two examples from the Caribbean are at Figure 2.

This study also shows that not only did the Taíno, on their mammal-poor islands, record on their artifacts a special interest in fellow mammals, but they most often portrayed those liminal creatures which could express powerful access to other worlds. In sum, the pervasive nature of Precolumbian Caribbean evidence of belief in human or shamanic transformation is undeniable. Some of the most vivid transformational symbols are images of the chrysalis, the caterpillar, and occasionally the moth or butterfly. A moth bowl is at Figure 3, and three views of a shaman’s rattle carrying similar transformational images are at Figure 4.

Second, akin to expressions of creature transformability, is persistent evidence throughout the Caribbean that analogy and association were used to express ideas. The many multivocal artifacts produced by the Taíno and their predecessors suggest that similarity in shape or behavior meant a corresponding innate likeness or relationship. Such a system, which also seems embedded in some mainland traditions (Hunt 1977; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987b), would have connected man with his world in a multitude of subtle ways.

DISCUSSION

The study category, “Ceremonial Artifacts,” includes articles which would have been used in rituals involving the use of hallucinogenic drugs: Spoons & Vomicas, Pestles, Drug Tables, Inhaladors, and Duhos. Although certainly due in part to differences in collection and curation, nearly five times as many ceremonial artifacts are attributed to Hispaniola as to Puerto Rico. A large number of these are pestles which show a crouching anthropomorph. Its position suggests transformationality as do the liminal owls and birds found on pestles as well as on vomicas. Among these many pestles of Hispaniola is one with a motif I have been calling “creature-on-back.” I believe this motif to be overtly expressive of transformationality. An example is at Figure 5.

Many of the duhos of both Puerto Rico and Hispaniola also carry transformational motifs and their distribution is of interest. Of the 28 Puerto Rico duhos recorded, nine are fairly plain small stone seats or metates of a type portrayed in large ritual effigy vessels found only on Hispaniola. An example is the drawing from Fewkes (1970 [1907] at Figure 6. Puerto Rico duhos frequently carry turtle imagery and entoptic symbols but only three of the 28 suggest anthropomorphic identity. In contrast, sixteen of the 24 Hispaniola duhos suggest transformation from human to zoomorphic identity. Fourteen project power images. Of these fourteen, eight suggest shamanic hallucinogenic behavior. An example is at Figure 7. Six have aggressive human/zoomorphic heads projecting masculinity from the front (Figure 8) and may suggest a shift toward more intensive and concentrated forms of social (chiefly) power.
Symbols of transformation are strong in these Hispaniola “chiefly” seats with their bird tail backs and human heads with suggestions of transformation to jaguar, turtle, or bat identity. These seem related both to the turtle seats of Puerto Rico (stone example at Figure 9) and the jaguar heads of Costa Rican ceremonial metates (Figure 10). Their entoptic symbols also suggest hallucinogenic behavior.

The duho category serves to point up characteristics common to other categories. First, anthropomorphic symbolism seems to be not only more common but also more expressive on Hispaniola duhos than on those from Puerto Rico. This contrast is seen again among the zemi tri-points. Second, one or two examples of some important artifact styles, seemingly perfected on one of these two islands often is found on the other. For instance, there was a “chiefly power seat” typical of Hispaniola found on Puerto Rico, as well as another of stone which echoes the “shamanic power” duho category of Hispaniola (Figure 11). This distributional pattern also appears among certain other artifacts. The duho category invites a number of questions, such as: Was there a relationship between metates and duhos? If so, were all considered sacred? Can we show from duho styles a function separation between shamanic or priestly leadership and, perhaps, stronger or more political Chiefs? Were the “shamanic” seats as powerful as the “chiefly power” type? Do the number of “aggressive” seats coincide in any way with the number of paramount chiefs in a region? (I have little specific provenience for any of the duhos although one is listed from Haiti (perhaps Xaragua), and another (at Figure 8) was found in a cave in Altagracia Province.

Among the many figures which show transformational symbols is a majestic bird headed figure from Jamaica at Figure 12. Again, the bird head can be seen as signifying a trance state deriving power from flight. Numerous ceramic “Effigy Vessels” suggest transformation by depicting states of flying, swimming, or floating. Some daggers (Figure 13), and a miniature turtle effigy (Figure 14) also express such notions, as does the well known “floating shamans” bowl at Figure 15 and the turtle bowl at Figure 16 made from a human skull.

Of interest in a “Personal Artifacts” category is the apparent relationship between the beak-bird pendants of the Caribbean and the beak-bird complex of the Central American mainland. (Figure 17a. - d.) The depictions of beak birds in both areas suggest to me the effects of hallucinogenic trance and the power of those who are able to transform themselves into birds. I believe these beak birds represent macaws, often seen as liminal members of human households, as well as mythical rulers of the underworld. Size relationships within big-beaked bird images vary a great deal. For instance, note the small head at the bottom of the relatively large bird image from Costa Rica (Figure 18). I think the famed tri-point showing a frog clutching a human head (Figure 19) also is related to this theme.

Within a “Masks, Heads, and Zemi Tri-Points” category there are more artifacts from Puerto Rico than from Hispaniola for the first time, a count which reflects the many more Type I tri-points identified from Puerto Rico. While a number of the Puerto Rico Type I tri-points are anthropomorphic, they seem static compared to Puerto Rico Type I zoomorphic tri-points. The realistic details on many of the latter demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the natural world and a need to communicate those details. For instance, note the human hands at the rear of the relatively large bird image from Costa Rica (Figure 18). I think the famed tri-point showing a frog clutching a human head (Figure 19) also is related to this theme.

Often even the stone selected seems to conform to qualities of the animal subject. This is especially apparent among the many dog tri-points of Puerto Rico which record details of patterned dogs with pointed ears or plain dogs with flat lap ears. In fact, dog tri-points can usually be identified by ears, feet, and tails. Figure 21a. 1-2, b., and c. 1-3 show examples of mottled coats, pointed ears, tails, feet, and nails. Such details are characteristic of most dog tri-points.

It has been suggested that on Puerto Rico the dog carried the ancient mythic load of the liminal mainland jaguar. The dog tri-points of Puerto Rico support this conclusion. The different modes of presenting the two types of dogs recorded in Type I tri-points demonstrate by their number and style that the Puerto Rican jaguar/dog must have been the small feisty, pointed-eared, highly decorated, and often spotted dog which appears on so many tri-points from Puerto Rico. A few of these are shown at Figure 21 and a dog duho of this type is at Figure 22. For contrast see the larger, plainer, flap-eared dog so clearly depicted by two tri-points at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City at Figure 23 a. and b.
Iconographic focus leads me to conclude that the Puerto Rico dog/jaguar substitution was converted on Hispaniola to a fierce bat complex which may have seemed more appropriate to a developing need for more aggressive power symbolism. The many ceramic fierce bat images of Hispaniola are epitomized by the bat at Figure 24. Most bat imagery carries both male and female symbols and, like the chiefly duhos, emphatically presents fertility in female images of sustenance juxtaposed with male energy, power, and fierce aggressiveness. These many “fierce bat” images may be the clearest evidence we have that a social change must have taken place on Hispaniola sometime in the late Taino period which required more overt expressions of power than could be extracted from the Puerto Rican jaguar/dog complex.

While more Type I tri-points, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, are found on Puerto Rico, more Type II and Type III tri-points with primarily anthropomorphic emphasis are recorded from Hispaniola. Some very complex Type II tri-points seem characteristic of and probably developed first on Hispaniola (Figure 25) but, again, a few examples are credited to each island. These clearly show the creature-on-back motif first shown here on a pestle. Additional examples of this image appear on two small Type III tri-points from Puerto Rico (Figures 26 and 27) which include “creatures-on-back” among other identities.

The creature-on-back theme can be traced to several areas on the mainland where it has been called variously “alter ego,” “guardian statue,” “double,” or “nagual.” This concept seems related to the beak-bird theme in the Caribbean and Costa Rica discussed earlier. A larger example of a typical mainland style from Nicaragua is at Figure 28.

Small Type IV tri-points appear everywhere in the Caribbean. Some very large plain Type IV’s are found only on Hispaniola. These are starkly impressive symbols of power, more dramatic, I think, than other more complex artifacts and possibly somehow related to the emergence of the fierce bat complex. Examples which do not do them justice are at Figure 29. They, too, seem the apex of a development which must have begun on the Venezuelan mainland. Supportive of this conclusion are several mainland Type IV tri-points at Figure 30. The small somewhat unformed composite Venezuelan tri-point also included here was found at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. It suggests that notions of transformationality also were at home on the Venezuelan mainland.

The stone collars which carry so many messages are elaborated almost exclusively on Puerto Rico (Figure 31). The motif complexes they carry (of swimmers, reptilians, fish, canoes, frogs, and birds), are particularly expressive of experience in the Orinoco delta region. The totality of their expression also seems more related to mythical themes of South America and the upstream Orinoco than can be found on other Caribbean artifacts. Collar imagery is too complex to discuss here but there is one very impressive collar from Puerto Rico with a bat head (Figure 32) which suggests that the significance of human/bat transformation may have migrated from Hispaniola to Puerto Rico, perhaps at a late Precolombian date.

CONCLUSIONS

Because ritual behavior has been described in more detail on Hispaniola than on other Caribbean islands, we often assume that myths, beliefs, and behaviors must have been similar on nearby Puerto Rico. The artifact record assembled here contradicts this, suggesting that there was considerable ritual and political difference between the two islands. Hispaniola seems to have had a larger corpus of ritual artifacts than Puerto Rico. For instance I found drug tables, or anthropomorphic figures with a superior platform, only from Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Cuba. Nineteen “Burial Artifacts” have been identified from Hispaniola and Cuba. None of either category are attributed to Puerto Rico. Further, while artifact design which recorded beliefs in transformationality are common to both islands, suggestions that political leaders used drug trancing and notions of transformation to acquire and maintain power is especially evident on Hispaniola. While the artifact total in each category is small, such comparisons suggest that ceremonial behaviors on Hispaniola were quite different from those on Puerto Rico where the artifact emphasis was on Type I tri-points and elaborated stone collars.

In sum, it seems that the differences in artifact distribution, only partially described here, support the arguments of scholars who have begun to point out that the population of the Caribbean on contact
was probably not as homogenous as previously assumed. The available inventory of elaborated artifacts suggests that while at some times and in some places Hispaniola and Puerto Rico were closely associated, marked differences in artifact design and distribution suggest that culturally and politically they had taken very different developmental paths.

Perhaps leadership styles on both islands were changing when the Spanish arrived. Perhaps Puerto Rico was just then beginning to import symbols of more aggressive leadership from Hispaniola.

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CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Jaguar face on stone head, Hispaniola. (Museo del Hombre, DR.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 2. Examples of Bird on Head motif, Puerto Rico. a. (Indian Museum, PR.) Photo and drawing by author; b. After Krieger 1929:Bul. 147, Pl. 12.

Figure 3. Butterfly or moth bowl, Trinidad. (National Museum of the American Indian, New York City.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 4. Shaman’s rattle, Hispaniola. (Acevedo Collection, Miami.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 5. Creature-on-back motif on pestle, Hispaniola. (American Museum of Natural History, NYC, #42/1.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 6. Taino seated on Duho, Hispaniola. After Fewkes 1970:PL.LXXXII.

Figure 7. Shaman style duho, Hispaniola. (Historical Society of St. Louis, MO.) After Arron 1975:122. Drawing by author.

Figure 8. Chiefly power style duho, Hispaniola. (Museo del Hombre, DR.) Photo and drawing by author.


Figure 11. Shaman style stone duho from Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. (University of Puerto Rico Museum.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 12. Birdman figure from cave at Carpenter’s Mountain, Jamaica. (British Museum.) After Kerchache 1994:128. Drawing by author.

Figure 13. Effigy dagger, Hispaniola. (Museo del Hombre, DR.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 14. Miniature turtle effigy, Dominica, Lesser Antilles. After Fewkes, 1970:PL.XC.

Figure 15. Floating shamans bowl, Puerto Rico. (National Museum of the American Indian, #3/9395, NYC.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 16. Turtle effigy bowl from a human skull, from La Romana area, Hispaniola. (Acevedo Collection.) Photo and drawing by author.


Figure 19. Tri-point of frog-on-head, St. Isabel, Puerto Rico. (University of Puerto Rico Museum.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 20. Literal tri-point messages, Puerto Rico. a. and b. Indian Museum, Puerto Rico; c. National Museum of the American Indian, #16/3338, L 10". Photos and drawings by author.

Figure 21. Dog tri-points, Puerto Rico. a. (University of Puerto Rico Museum; b. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, #16980; c. University of Puerto Rico Museum.) Photos and drawings by author.

Figure 22. Dog duho, from north coast of Puerto Rico. (Indian Museum, San Juan, PR.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 23. Examples of flap-eared dog tri-points, Puerto Rico. (a. and b. American Museum of Natural History, NYC, #25/309 and #25/302.) Photos and drawings by author.

Figure 24. Fierce bat bottle, Hispaniola. (Museo de García Arévalo, Santo Domingo, DR.) Photo and drawing by author.

Figure 25. Type II tri-point with creature-on-back motif, Hispaniola. (Regional Museum, Altos de Chavaying by author.

Figure 26. Miniature Type II tri-point with creature-on-back motif, Puerto Rico. (Indian Museum, PR.) After Joyce 1916:PL. XVII.

Figure 27. Small Type II tri-point with “creature-on-back” motif, Puerto Rico. (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, #2314-11, L 4-1/4") After Fewkes 1970:PL.XLIX.

Figure 28. Creature-on-back motif on stone monument from Pensacola Island, Lake Nicaragua, Nicaragua. After Joyce 1916:50 (Fig.3).
Figure 29. Large Type IV tri-points from Hispaniola. (a. and b. Museo del Hombre, Santo Domingo; c. Regional Museum, Altos de Chav L 4-1/4".) After Fewkes 1970:PL.XLIX.

Figure 30. Tri-points from Venezuela: a. After Veloz Magiolo 1982:18, Vol. 17, Bulletin of Museo del Hombre, DR; b. After Cruxent and Rouse 1959:210; c. After Kidder 1944:PL.XI, (Vol.XXVI); d. After de Jong 1924:46, Fig. 7 (from los Cerritos, La Mata); e. from Hacienda La Mata, Maracay, (American Museum of Natural History, NYC, #41/3168). Drawings by author.

Figure 31. Stone Collars, Puerto Rico. a. After Kerchache 1994:251, (Museum de l’Homme #MH 91491, Paris); b. After Fewkes 1922:192, Fig. 37); c. After Lopez de Molina 1991:25. Drawings of a. and c. by author.

Figure 32. Bat collar, Puerto Rico. (Heye Museum, NYC.) After Fewkes 1922:Pl.95.