

THE TAINOS: "Men of the Good"

By JOSE BARREIRO

This article offers some descriptions of the first Caribbean people to encounter Columbus in 1492. Tainos is what these people called themselves; they belong to a larger family of related languages called Arawak.

The word Taino meant "men of the good," and from most indications the Tainos were good. Living on the lush and hospitable islands over fifteen hundred years, the indigenous people of "La Taina" developed a culture where the human personality was gentle. Among the Taino at the time of contact, by all accounts, generosity and kindness were dominant values.

The Taino's culture has been designated as "primitive" by Western scholars, yet the Tainos strove to feed all the people, and maintained a spirituality that respected most of their main animal and food sources, as well as the natural forces like climate, season, and weather. The Taino lived respectfully in a bountiful place and so their nature was bountiful.

The naked people Columbus first sighted lived in an island world of rainforests and tropical weather, and adventure and fishing legends at sea. Theirs was a land of generous abundance. They could build a dwelling from a single tree (the Royal Palm) and from several others (gommier, ceiba), a canoe that could carry more than one hundred people.

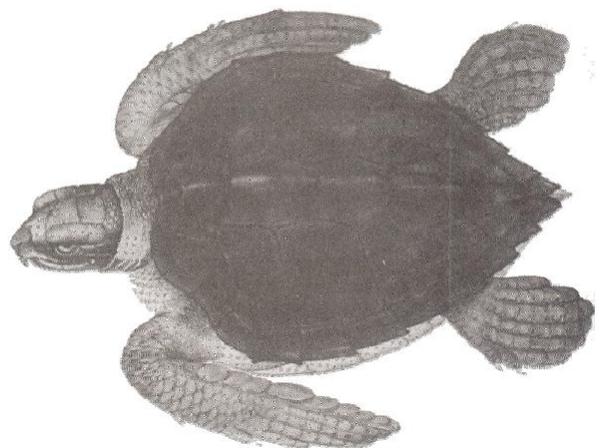
The Tainos lived in the shadows of a diverse forest so biologically remarkable as to be almost unimaginable to us. Indeed because what happened to their world in the last few centuries was so devastating, we may never again know how the land or the life of the land appeared in detail. What we do know is that their world would appear to us, as it did to the Spanish of the 15th century, as a tropical paradise.

The Taino world, for the most part, had some of the appearance that modern imaginations ascribe to the South Pacific islands. The people lived in small, clean villages of neatly appointed thatch dwellings along rivers inland and on the coasts. They were a handsome people who had no need of clothing for warmth. They liked to bathe often, which prompted a Spanish royal law forbidding the practice, "for we are informed it does them much harm," wrote Queen Isabella.

The Taino were a sea-going people, and took pride in their courage on the high ocean as well as their skill in finding their way around their world. They visited one another constantly. Columbus was often astonished at finding lone Indian fishermen sailing in the open ocean as he made his way among the islands. Once, a canoe of Taino

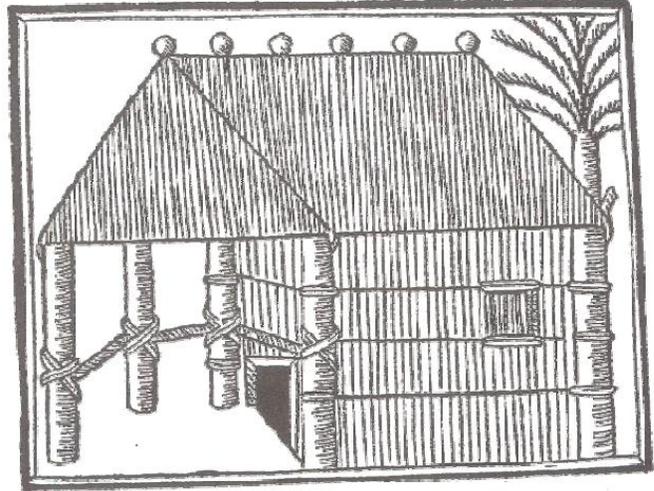
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Highlight any positive characteristics about the Tainos people in one color. Highlight in a different color any negative characteristics about the Tainos people.



men followed him from island to island until one of their relatives, held captive on Columbus's flagship, jumped over the side to be spirited away.

Among Tainos, the women and some of the men harvested corn, nuts, cassava, and other roots. They appear to have practiced a rotation method in their agriculture. Boys hunted fowl from flocks that "darkened the sun," according to Columbus, and the men forded rivers and braved ocean to hunt and fish for the abundant, tree-going jutia, the succulent manati, giant sea turtles and countless species of other fish, turtles and shellfish. Around every hut, Columbus wrote, there were flocks of tame ducks (yaguasa), which the people roasted and ate. Tainos along the coasts kept large circular corrals made of reeds which they filled with fish and turtles by the thousands. They were known to catch fish and turtles by way of a remora (suction fish) tied by the tail.



The Taino world of 1492 was a thriving place. The Taino islands supported large populations that had existed in an environment of Carib-Taino conflict for, according to archeological evidence, perhaps fifteen hundred years, although the earliest human fossil in the region is dated at fifteen thousand years. Tainos and Caribs may have fought one another, but there is little evidence to support any notion that they tried to wipe each other out through warfare. A Carib war party arrived and attacked, was successful or beaten back, and the Tainos, from all accounts, returned to what they were doing before the attack.

Early descriptions of Taino life at contact tell of large concentrations, strings of a hundred or more villages of five hundred to one thousand people. These concentrations of people in coastal areas and river deltas were apparently well-fed by a nature-harvesting and agricultural production system whose primary value was that all of the people had the right to eat. Everyone in the society had a food or other goods-producing task, even the highly esteemed caciques [community leaders] and behiques {medicine people}, were often seen to plant, hunt, and fish along with their people. In the Taino culture, as with most natural world cultures of the Americas, the concept was that the primary bounties of the earth, particularly those that humans eat, are to be produced in cooperation and shared.

Like all American indigenous peoples, the Taino had an involved economic life. They could trade throughout the Caribbean and had systems of governance and beliefs that maintained harmony between human and natural environments. The Tainos enjoyed a peaceful way of life that modern anthropologists now call "ecosystemic." In the wake of recent scientific revelations about the cost of high-impact technologies upon the natural world, a culture such as the Taino, that could feed several million people without permanently wearing down



its surroundings, might command higher respect.

There was little or no quarreling observed among the Tainos by the Spaniards. The old caciques and their councils of elders were said to be well-behaved, had a deliberate way of speaking and great authority. The people either worked in the gardens (conucos) or fishing and hunting. They had ball games, played in bateyes or courtyards, in front of the cacique's house. They held both ceremonial and social dances, called areitos, during which their creation stories and other cosmologies were recited.

Among the few Taino~Arawak customs that have survived, the predominant ideas are that ancestors should be properly greeted by the living humans at certain times and that natural forces and the spirits behind each group of food and medicinal plants and useful animals should be appreciated in ceremony.

Excerpted from an article by Jose' Barreiro, first published in "View from the Shore" American Indian Perspectives on the Quincenfenary" (Northeast Indian Quarterly, Fall 1990). Barreiro is a member of the Taino Nation of the Antilles.