

WHAT WERE THE TRAITS OF THE CARIBBEAN CULTURE DESTROYED BY THE CONQUISTADORS?!

Taino community in the Caribbean before the arrival of the conquistadors

By: Dr Sam Osmanagich, Ph.D. from Dominican Republic

The arrival of Columbus and the Spanish to the 'New World' had started in the Caribbean. We know almost everything about how they destroyed 'the natives'. But very little is known about the lifestyle of this community, their social and spiritual achievements.

On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived at the shores of a great island, today known as Hispaniola, which is shared by two present-day countries: the Dominican Republic (2/3 of the island) and Haiti (1/3 of the island).

Columbus and his crew were the first Europeans to meet the people of the Taino community. Later on, he called them 'Indians'. He described the Taino as 'tall, well-proportioned, very generous and kind.'

He continued:

"They traded with us. They gave us everything they had and willingly so. It was their pleasure to meet our wishes. They are good-natured. Do not know evil. They do not kill, do not steal. There are no better people in the world. They love their neighbours as themselves. Their speech is sweetest in the world. They are kind and laugh all the time."

525 years later, I am touring the area where the Taino once lived: South Florida, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, St. Thomas, St. Marten, the Bahamas...

Spanish friar Bartolome de Las Casas, who lived in Santo Domingo (today's Dominican capital city) in 1561, wrote in his chronicles 'History of the Indies':

"When I came to the city in 1508, there were only 60,000 Indians left. Therefore, between 1494 and 1508 more than three million Indians perished in wars, from disease, slavery and labor in the mines. Who in the future generations will believe that?"

On the basis of his writings, we infer that the Taino population in the Caribbean was at the level of ten millions. Unlike these 16th century estimates, present day historians, particularly the Spanish, intentionally underestimate the number of 'Indians' and suggest that the figure was

closer to 100,000. Thereby, they hope to diminish the scale of their barbaric actions considerably, and might even let it slide into obscurity.

In addition to the above mentioned islands and Florida, which I visited in January 2017, the Taino lived in Cuba, Jamaica, and Trinidad. It is assumed that they came to these islands during the migrations from South America.

The best museum about the Caribbean world and Taino culture is located in the eastern part of the Dominican Republic, near the city of La Romana. A half an hour drive by taxi from the center to the protected zone, with its golf and polo playing fields, villas and apartments, palm boulevards, hotels and shopping malls for the rich and privileged. This kilometer-long complex is also where Altos de Chavon, the replica of a medieval European city is located. Paved roads, a small church (blessed by Pope John Paul in 1979), and the amphitheater for 5,000 people (opened with a concert by Frank Sinatra and Carlos Santana in 1982). Naturally, what drew my attention was the 'Regional Archaeological Museum' opened in 1981.

The traces of the life in the Caribbean islands go six thousand years back into the past. The Ciboney culture is credited with the shaping of the stone balls that had been placed in the tombs of the deceased. These balls are small in size, 10 - 30 centimeters of diameter, crafted into very regular spheres. There is no explanation why just the stone balls. Did they know about the connection between spherical geometry and energy fields?

The Museum's display includes decorated stone axes, petroglyphs, preserved cave paintings, all proving that these were not primitive cultures struggling for survival. Art was undoubtedly an integral part of everyday life.

Stone tools, but also sea-shell tools, are elegant and demonstrate skill in processing fruit, animals and sea life for nourishment. The naturally occurring implements of this pre-technological society are not a sign of inferiority, but simply of life in harmony with nature and with what the environment has to offer.

They were deft in building wooden canoes that could carry from two to a hundred and fifty people, depending on their dimensions and purpose. Being adept fishermen, they caught fish in several ways. They knitted cotton and palm tree leaf nets with pebbles attached to the ends, which were used in greater depths. They would be positioned over a shoal full of fish, they would skilfully toss the net into the air and it would sink over the shoal. Thanks to the pebbles attached to its edges, the net would close and envelop the fish. The other way to catch fish was with the bow and arrow, or with wooden spears sharpened and used as harpoons. The Taino used to fish in the shallows of the clear Caribbean Sea. A third way of fishing was with a kind of weir (similar to the one used in the Adriatic), sealed rectangular nets which acted as fish traps.

For hunting, the Tainos used wooden bows and arrows and spears tipped with fish bones or sharpened stones. The abundance of the animal, avian or marine wildlife allowed for a diverse diet. Unlike men, women tilled the land and cultivated various local crops.

Thanks to the first Europeans, we have some information about the sociopolitical organization of the Taino culture. The present-day island of Hispaniola they called 'Ayiti', which is how the name Haiti originated. Ayiti was divided into eight provinces. Each one was led by an elder, whom the Europeans called 'chieftains'. The elders lived in the capital city. Secondary settlements were run by local chiefs, who were subordinated to the higher-level elders. The leadership was passed from generation to generation, but on the mothers' side. Thus, for example, when an elder died, his brother would take over the role. If the deceased had no brothers, it would be the turn of the male children of the elder's mother's sister.

The hierarchy existed in the cities as well. Besides the elders and their deputies, the ruling class also included shamans. Then came artists, farmers, fishermen and other groups.

In the center of the city there was a public square, sometimes round and sometimes rectangular. It was used for festivals, games, processions and various rituals. The elder lived in the largest house, built of wood and with a terrace, all covered with palm tree leaves. At the bottom of the pyramid were ordinary community members, who lived in large, circular, wooden cottages, each housing five to ten families. Polygamy was commonplace for both men and women.

The most important Taino festival was Areito. Sometimes it lasted for days. It was an occasion when everyone dyed their bodies red, white and black, and wore their most beautiful shells-and-seeds necklaces. Various geometrical shapes, made by individual clay stamps dipped in different colors and leaving characteristic marks on the bodies would be prominently displayed. Women would form a line and dance. Men would play various musical instruments. During long, pleasant and warm nights, the elders told the stories about the origins of the Planet, of the sea and islands, of wildlife and of the ancestors. They would sing in gratitude for those that were no longer with them and who made it possible for them to live in happiness and contentment.

The recitals, poems and tales would be accompanied by the drums, flutes, and the sounds of shells. Those were the opportunities for new generations to learn from the oral histories and to prepare to pass the knowledge on to their own descendants one day.

The pleasant climate throughout the year and the vicinity of the sea were why the Tainos were usually naked. Once married, women would start wearing clothes covering them from the waist to the knees. Besides the clothes from the waist down, married men wore little pieces of shiny minerals on their arms and around the neck. Wearing decorative pieces in the ears, nose and waist was common. Gold jewellery was a common decoration for men and women alike. All women sported a similar hairstyle: long hair in the back and trimmed short up front.

Several burial methods were practiced at the cemeteries situated far away from the settlements. The elders were buried under the ground, sitting on a wooden chair, surrounded with objects of adornment. The Tainos believed that the physical death was not the end of life, but that the individual soul continued living.

A game with a rubber ball was both ceremonial in nature and a form of entertainment. Two teams of 25 players each, women included, had to keep the ball in the air as long as they could, and to stop it from touching the ground. They could not use their hands, but they could use their elbows, knees and head. The rectangular playground was marked with stones which made up the boundaries of the playing field. Curiously enough, circles of monoliths were discovered in several locations, resembling the stone circles of Mayan playing fields in Central America. If we recall that the first inhabitants of the Caribbean had come from Belize and Guatemala, then this tradition was probably brought over from Central America.

The spiritual aspect of the Tainos' life was supervised by shamans. All important decisions were made during rituals led by shamans, seated in ceremonial chairs. The male elders gathered and commenced the process of 'purification' of their bodies. To empty their stomachs, they used wooden spatulas to provoke vomiting. Another method of cleaning before the ritual started was by fasting. When they were purified, they would inhale the 'cohoba' hallucinogenic dust by means of Y-shaped hollow wooden stalks which fitted in both nostrils.

During these 'trips' they communed with ancestral spirits and spirits of nature ('zemis'), asked for advice and suggestions on making decisions of greatest importance for the community. They mastered the techniques of astral projection. They could see the world more clearly and they sought answers to their questions.

The Taino believed that the seas were created after a major global flood. Souls of the dead went to the underground world but at night they returned to the land of the living.

Cuba is the largest Caribbean island. The Taino had 29 provinces there. Upon their arrival, the Spanish simply installed their own colonial cities on the existing settlements. They even kept the original names. Thus, even today's names of the Cuban cities originated from the Taino language: Havana, Batabano, Baracoa, Bayamo... The name 'Cuba' also comes from the Taino language, and it means 'abundance of fertile land' (Cubao).

Other large islands, such as Puerto Rico, were also organized into provinces and ruled by the elders.

The Taino culture left behind traces of their literacy. They frequently used petroglyphs and even today they can be seen in the caves or painted on rocks. The Spanish also took words from their language, such as 'barbacoa' (barbecue), 'kanoa' (canoe), 'tabaco' (tobacco), 'bat ata' (sweet potatoes), 'juracan' (hurricane) and many other words used today in both the Spanish and English language.

When Columbus met the Taino communities in the Bahamas, Hispaniola, Cuba and Puerto Rico, he named them the 'Indians'. At that time, he thought that he had sailed to India. This term became a common designation for the local inhabitants of Central and North America.

On his first (1492) and second (1493) voyages, Columbus had no women in his crews. The first encounters of the Spanish sailors with the Taino culture showed the real face of the Europeans: it resulted in the rape of local women. As a consequence, the first Mestizos were born.

During his second voyage, Columbus came back with the precise instructions of the Spanish Court. It demanded from each Taino older than 14 to prepare a quantity of gold (defined as the size of a falcon's stomach) for the king. If such a quantity could not be produced, 12 kilograms of cotton would be demanded as a substitute. If any person failed to meet these demands, their hands were cut off and they would be left to bleed to death, as a brutal example for the others.

European diseases also arrived with the Spanish, primarily the smallpox. The Taino did not have a natural immunity for this disease and, in only a few years, 90 percent of the population was wiped out.

Those who survived became slaves. The Spanish set up a system in which the Taino labored for them, on the land or in the mines. In return, they 'gave' them their system of education (teaching them Spanish), Christianization, miserable wages and 'protection'.

When the Taino realized who they were dealing with, they tried to organize and fight the vicious Europeans. But they lacked adequate weapons, most of them died of disease and they lost their social organization and leadership. Several rebellions were bloodily crushed. There are records about instances of peaceful demonstrations, when the Taino boycotted farm work and entire towns starved to death.

It took only a few decades to wipe out a nation of ten million people from the Planet. Their way of life had been destroyed, all in the name of the search for gold and territorial expansion of the Spanish crown. This is one of the most shameful periods in human history.

Curiously, even today a large statue of Christopher Columbus still stands in front of the Governmental Palace in Nassau (the Bahamas).

The Taino culture has been lost forever. Small surviving groups of Mestizos are trying to revive the Taino tradition. The fact is that a small percentage of their ancestors' blood runs in their veins, but it is not substantial enough to start a movement or give them influence on a regional scale. Nowadays, there are several thousand people who declare themselves 'Spanish-American Indians', and nearly ten thousand call themselves 'Tainos'.

After the eradication of the Tainos from the Caribbean, the Spanish began bringing black African slaves to the Caribbean to work for them. They were brought over in such large numbers that they soon became the majority population, and have remained so to this day.

Let us recall the first impressions Columbus had of the Tainos in 1492:

“They are kind and always smiling.”

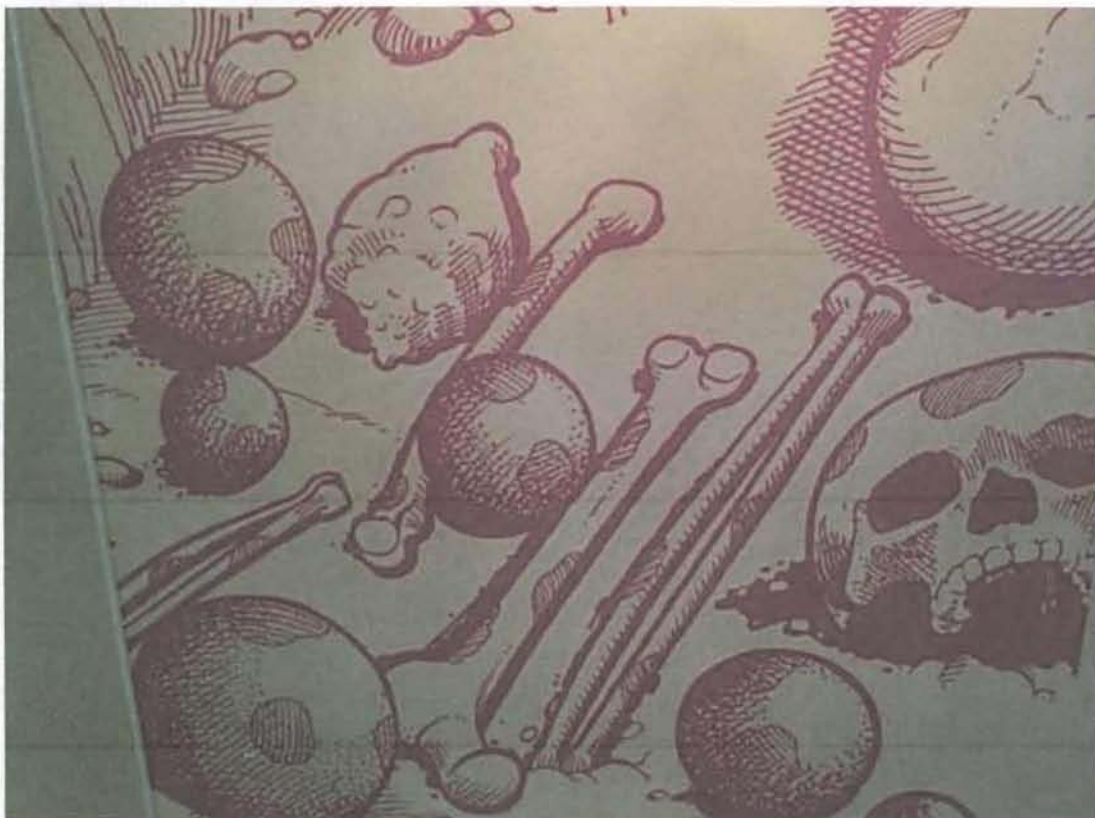
What is the purpose of life?

It is not hoarding of material riches or technological products in our homes. The purpose should be to be happy, content, and full of spiritual knowledge. All the while our smile is the reflection of the fullness of our lives.

It seems that the technological civilization of Europe sought to hide the examples of such happy peoples from Central, North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia.





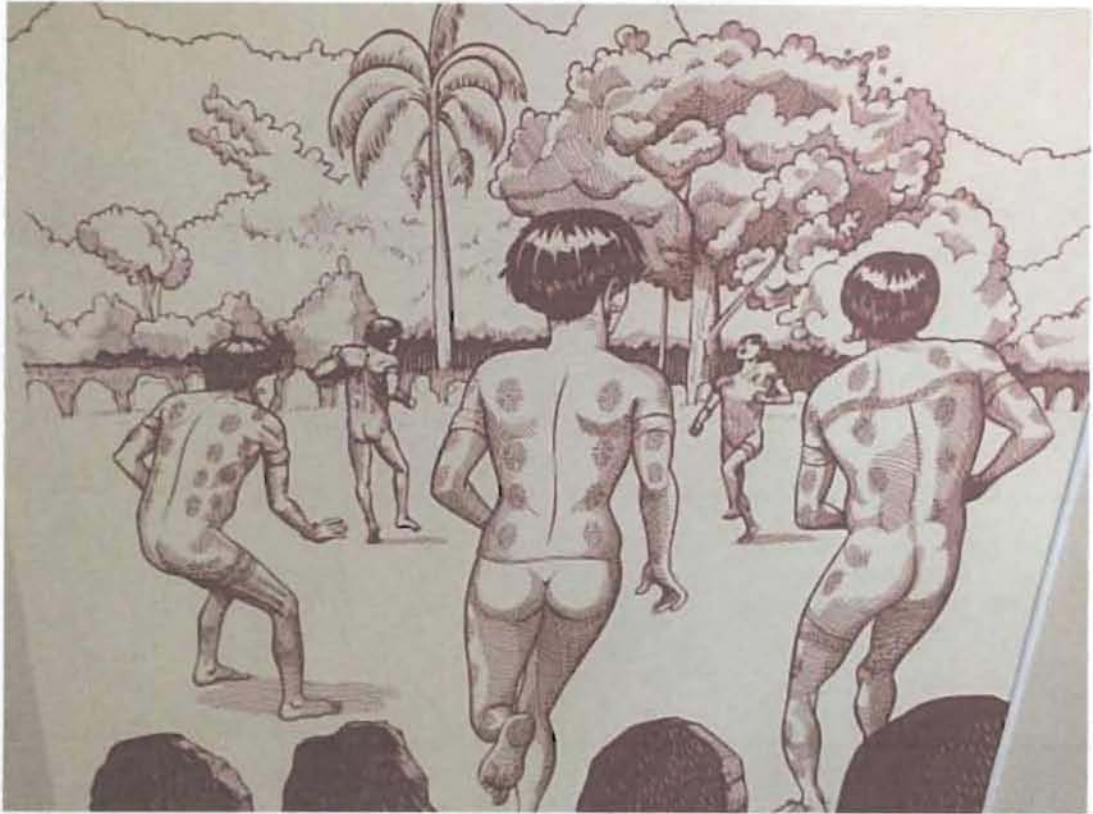
















Correspondence address:

Dr. Sam Osmanagich
osmanagic@msn.com