TAINO INDIANS:
SETTLEMENTS OF THE CARIBBEAN

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In the past, and even currently, there is some confusion over just who the Taino Indians were. Many have also referred to them as Arawak Indians and although my own research has been able to determine why there is some confusion, it is still unclear if they are the same or a different ethnic group. I will describe our current understanding of who the Taino were, introduce two possible migratory explanations of the Taino, and discuss the settlements, the settlement locations, and their importance to Taino culture.

The name "Taino" in the native language means "good" or "noble." According to Peter Hulme (1986) this name was unofficially given by the Spanish to the people they encountered and was later applied to the same ethnic group by Cornelius Rafinesque in 1836 (60). The term "Arawak" was a name that was originally applied to the Taino by the Spanish based on the similarities of the language spoken by the Arawak Indians in Guiana. Irvin Rouse (1992) relates that Daniel Brinton looked at the similarities between the Arawak and the Taino in 1871 and determined that based on cultural and linguistic similarities, the Taino were of the same group as the Lokonos Arawak of northeast South America (5).

The Taino were one of two main populations living the Caribbean at the time of European contact. They occupied a large portion of the northern Caribbean and the Greater Antilles Islands. The other main population was the Island Caribs who occupied most of the eastern Caribbean and the Lesser Antilles Islands. While the Carib Indians were considered more warlike, the Taino Indians were considered more peaceful and docile. However, some evidence does suggest there were segments of the Taino population who participated in raiding parties. Often times, when hostilities occurred between the Taino and Caribs, the Taino were defeated. Carib raiding parties would often take Taino women and make the Carib wives. By AD 100 the Taino had lost a large portion of their territory in the northern portions of the Lesser Antilles and even in some of the eastern portions of the Greater Antilles due to territorial conflicts with the Caribs.

The Taino Indians were a matrilineal society who were, for the most part, peaceful and lived a semi-sedentary lifestyle. According to Leslie-Gail Atkinson (2006) farming was an important aspect in Taino subsistence and was supplemented with gathering, hunting of small animals, and fishing and shell-fish gathering (100 and 105). They were accomplished seafarers and had extensive trade networks. Shortly after European contact in the mid to late 1400s, the Taino were a virtually extinct population due to disease, slavery, and conquest by Europeans. Those who did manage to escape, primarily in Jamaica, fled to the interior hills and mountain areas.

Migration and Taino Emergence

Although the Taino were a recent addition to the Caribbean Islands (as late as 200 AD), it is important to understand the migrations into the islands prior to that. William Keegan (1995) believed that there were two migratory waves into the Caribbean Islands (407). The first wave is believed to have occurred as early as 4000-5000 BC from the Yucatan Peninsula of Middle America. It is believed that the colonists took advantage of the Caribbean Counter Current and were able to reach Cuba and move eastward into Hispaniola. Keegan (1995) explains that the second wave is believed to have been around 2500 BC and moved along the coastal areas of Venezuela and the Guianas to settle the West Indies. By the mid seventh century, the Taino had migrated through the Greater Antilles and had established large, permanent communities (407 and 411). According to Hilary Beckles (1999) the second migration saw the emergence of the Taino people in the Greater Antilles Islands around AD 200. By AD 650, the Taino had established large communities throughout the Greater Antilles (284).

Whenever we think of migratory movements it is important to bear in mind that population movements are generally a result of some form of external pressures such as conflict, internal population growth, and the opportunity to exploit resources which may not be readily available in the current area. It has been argued that each of the Caribbean Islands was settled in turn as they were encountered from the previous island or mainland. However, William Keegan (1995) shows that this could not have been the case. In his analysis of population dispersion, it appears that there would not have been enough time for the populations of one island to have reached a critical point to force migration and subsequent colonization of another island in the chain. Keegan shows that it is therefore not likely that each of the islands were settled in sequence, but rather were settled simultaneously (409 and 413).

Settlement Patterns and Distribution of the Taino

Settlement pattern and distribution can be defined as how sites are situated on the landscape, while settlement systems are the functions of contemporaneous settlements. This section will deal primarily with settlement pattern and distribution and the reasons for the Taino socio-political structure as a motivation for their settlement system.

By AD 800 the Taino had expanded into the Bahamian Archipelago and their population grew rapidly. There was a steady expansion of population based on efforts to maximize their access to productive resources. William Keegan and Morgan Maclachlan (1989) explain that access to resources is not the only explanation for their distribution (614). Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) relate the importance of these factors: "Studies of prehistoric settlement patterns emphasize resource distributions, production, exchange, and political relations as the determining factors of settlement locations. Settlement patterns are also influenced by social organization" (613). Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) further inform that some other reasons for adaptive strategies for colonization of new areas were generalized use of the environment, rapidly growing populations, spatial mobility, and maintenance of social organization (623).

The Taino were initially seafarers and gradually became land travelers as well. The sea offered opportunities which fostered exchanges of cultural ideas and helped to establish common identities allowing the islands to provide cultural differences. As an example of cultural difference, Irvin Rouse (1977) states that many of the ceramic artifacts found within sites in the Caribbean Islands show patterns of change which are gradual and indicate local development rather than an exchange of ideas (8). James Petersen (1991) explains that initial Taino settlements were primarily along the coastal areas, allowing them to focus more on the sea rather than land. As time progressed, they gradually moved inward to settle other areas of the landscape (129-130). Where this is evident is in Puerto Rico where short coastlines provided areas of settlement, yet only allowed for small populations. Difficulties in the Puerto Rico area also arose from the constraints of the river valleys.

William Keegan and Morgan Maclachlan (1989) indicate the Taino selection of islands for settlement and pairing of communities were for reasons of subsistence as well as for their social organization (623). The Taino colonized neighboring islands not out of convenience, but more likely as a means to maintain systems of matrilineal kinship and marriage. There appear to be compromises made in choosing settlement locations in order to maximize their availability of resources as well as maintain their social organization. There also

seems to be a preference to stay within easy communication with a parent community when creating a new settlement. This helped to promote inter-island visitation with fewer hazards.

Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) explain the two main forms of communal living for the Taino. The first is clustering, which is a grouping of small settlements around another settlement. The central settlement is interpreted to be that of a "king" or "high ruler". The second type of settlement is a plaza type, in which houses are situated around a central plaza (614-615). Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) indicate that Taino settlements evolved over time in three phases. The first phase was made up of settlements which were randomly distributed. During the second phase the settlements became regularly spaced pairs. The final phase is when clustering of settlements and the development of plaza communities occurred (624-626).

May of the sites which occurred in pairs may have been influenced by social relations. Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) tell us that these pairs were contemporaneous sites which were situated within each other's catchment area (624). The transition from settlement pairs to clusters is interpreted to be not only from continued population growth, but also from long-distance trade and inter-island raiding as well. David Cook (1998) concludes the Taino settlements were organized into a series of confederacies, or chiefdoms (15). Each village was organized into a district chiefdom which was ruled by a single district chief. Much of the socio-political organization of the Taino evolved for more than access to resources and maintenance of social organization; it served also as a means of protection of resources since many conflicts broke out over hunting, fishing, and resource use rights between populations.

Another explanation of Taino settlement systems was participation in long distance trade and exchange networks. Many of these exchange trips involved men from several communities. These communities would have needed to be within close proximity of each other. Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) explain that the planning of such trips would require someone of high status, such as a chief to organize and lead them. If the chief were ruling over several of these communities, or "chiefdoms," it would have been much easier to organize trade trips with men of the surrounding communities (626).
According to Irvin Rouse (1992) many of the Taino villages were large, permanent villages which supported populations up to 2,000 people. A number of villages were comprised of single domestic buildings ranging from 20 to 50 houses with related families living together. The predominate housing (*caney*) of the Taino were generally round with a conical roof. They were irregularly arranged around a plaza. The chief's house was usually larger, better built, and

tended to be situated on the plaza (9). Rouse (1992) also informs us that the chief's house was also usually rectangular. All the houses were made of straw or thatch; they had dirt floors and no partitions between families. Ordinary people slept in hammocks (*hamaca*) while chiefs used wooden platforms to sleep on (9).

Keegan and Maclachlan (1989) show as the settlement grew and sociopolitical influence increased, houses were built around additional plazas with the one central house of the chief in the middle connecting the subsequent plazas (616). Both settlement clusters and plaza communities reflect increased political integration within the Taino population. Irvin Rouse (1992) concludes there is a noted hierarchy within the plaza communities: commoners (*naboria*) were those who lacked positions of authority within their lineage, and the elite (*nitaino*) were those who held high ranking positions within their lineage (9).

Importance of Geographical Location

Taino subsistence consisted of farming, gathering, hunting of small birds, sea, and land animals, fishing and shellfish gathering. Atkinson (2006) states that among these, farming was the most important aspect of their subsistence (100 and 105). Their location on or near the water was also important as fishing provided a great source of protein for their diet. In addition to spearing fish and catching them with hooks, the Taino would also catch fish and turtles in nets. Irvin Rouse (1992) indicates what is unique about this and that they would create small weirs in order to place the caught fish and turtles until they were ready to eat them (13). Rouse (1977) explains archaeological evidence in the Antilles shows middens which contain abundant remains of land and sea animals being used for food (9).

David Cook (1998) notes the complexity of farming for the Taino indicate its importance as a subsistence strategy. The Taino would create growing fields, many of which contained mounds (conucos), some contained terraces, or some were just open fields that were tended (20-21). James Petersen (1991) contends the drier, more arid fields contained extensive irrigation systems (128). The use of mounds is a common strategy among Taino. Mounds were arranged in regular rows and measured one meter high and three meters in circumference. Mounds were used for a variety of reasons; to retard erosion, improve drainage, and make it easier to weed and harvest from. More importantly, the mounds were used because they helped to maintain the humidity in the ground longer and allowed for tubers to be stored for longer periods of time before harvesting. According to Irvin Rouse (1992) the Taino men planted cuttings with digging sticks, and women did the harvesting of crops (12).

Rouse (1992) reports in terms of the Taino farming and cultivation; yucca, corn, beans, squash, cotton, calabash, and tobacco were grown, and pineapple, palm nuts, guava berries, and guayiga roots were cultivated (12). Around the houses of the village calabash, cotton, and tobacco were grown. Calabash was used as a water container. While in other parts of the Americas maize was an important domesticate, for the Taino it was less important as a domesticate due to it not having a significant place in their religion. Rouse (1992) also indicates corn was usually eaten directly off the cob (12). In addition to this, bread was rarely made from maize because the humidity of the area didn't allow for it to preserve well. Instead of corn, Taino utilized cassava for bread. Cassava and sweet potato were the primary food domesticates. Cotton was used for fishing nets, hammocks, trade, and for skirts and headbands for women.

Rouse (1992) explains that the Taino were exquisite crafters of materials such as wood, stone, shell, bone, clay, and accomplished weavers of cotton (9). Access to these resources was a high priority to the Taino as many of these items were used not only for personal adornment, but for trade as well. Their extensive knowledge of sea travel allowed them to create long distance trade networks. Rouse (1992) explains that canoes were cut from logs that were charred and chipped out using stone celts (16). Additionally, Rouse indicates these canoes were capable of traveling great distances for fishing, raiding and trading (23). Another item used for trade was gold. Rouse (1992) explains that gold was mined locally, but the Taino lacked a working knowledge of metallurgy. Archaeological evidence shows pendants of gold cut with shell and overlaid on wooden objects as well as sewn into clothing. The Taino would usually hammer the gold into a plate before cutting it with a shell (9).

Other artifacts have been found and interpreted as being the personal adornment of a chief. These items are of cooper and gold alloy which, Rouse (1992) indicates, are to be believed to have been obtained through trade with South America (9). This further stresses the importance of the Taino trade network as well as their locations along the coastal areas of the islands. J.A. Cosculluela (1946) believes there is evidence to suggest that their patterns of trade included the Yucatan, Mexico and the northeastern portions of the South American coast as well as the other islands of the Greater and Lesser Antilles and the Bahamian Archipelago (10). Rouse (1977) indicates these patterns of trade were most likely the principle means of social interaction for the Taino (9). Marian DeWolf (1953) shows archaeological evidence recovered from the Little River site in Jamaica indicate that Puerto Rico styles of ceramic motifs influenced the inhabitants of Jamaica (232-233). Rouse (1992) speculates there are also indications that Jamaican Taino had some of the greatest variety of

personal adornment (11-12). While this may be an indicator of rank or status within their political structure, it also further emphasizes the importance of their trade networks.

Conclusion

In looking at the Taino several important aspects arise terms of why they chose to settle where they did and how those settlements were arranged. Coastal areas and even those inland areas which had easy access to the coast seem to be among the more important locations to the Taino. The changes from individual settlements, to pairs, and eventually to clusters around a central plaza show an increase in socio-political influence. This arrangement may have also helped to protect the village from outside influences.

Coastal areas were important to the Taino due to their reliance upon marine life for a portion of their diet. In addition, to this, their increasing socio-political influence and culture would flourish with the extensive trade networks that they frequently utilized. The inland settlements were equally as important as it allowed access to farming lands, fruits and berries which could be gathered, and land animals and birds which could be hunted to further supplement their diet. It also allowed access to materials which were used for crafting, trading, and making canoes.

Being a matrilineal society, the close proximity of their villages allowed for continued familial contact, promoted inter-island dependence, allowed for adequate defenses against raiders, and promoted the increased of their socio-political structure.

The Taino were rapidly becoming a very unique presence in the Caribbean. Some scholars even speculate that if not for disease, conquest, and slavery from European contact, they may have evolved into a civilization.

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