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Taíno Indian Myth and Practice: The Arrival of the Stranger King

By William F. Keegan
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For readers accustomed to the objective, third-person narratives characteristic of archaeology volumes, this is no ordinary book. In fact, it is not solely a book about archaeology, or history, or myth for that matter. It is a richly textured, deeply personal interpretation of one incident in Taíno/Spanish contact relations, the capture and death of Cacique Caonabó, a principal chief of the Island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) in 1494. Keegan uses this historical fact to weave a fascinating narrative about the role of myth and belief systems in everyday Taíno practice and how this affected Taíno and Spanish interaction. He goes back in time, reinterpreting the archaeological evidence for the origins of the Taíno, and forward to include the role of the archaeological practitioner (himself) in the construction of cultural narrative. He places his narrative within the geographical context of Hispaniola and the Bahamas (the latter named Islas Lucayas by the Spanish), and, to a lesser extent, Puerto Rico and parts of Cuba; and within the mythical geography (or cosmography) of the Taíno.

Keegan carefully and methodically lays out his assumptions and uses each chapter to build his argument that the powerful Cacique Caonabó was the “stranger king” of Taíno mythology, whose origins can be traced to an archaeological site in the Middle Caicos Island of the Bahamas. From this apparently simple theme he informs the reader about Taíno social and political organization, myth and practice; and he spins together culture, anthropology, history, geography, and archaeology to present a holistic cultural history of the Taíno. Keegan’s reputation as an original thinker and theoretician is evident in the novel ways in which the familiar events of the Spanish conquest of the Taínos and of Fray Ramón Pané’s account of Taíno mythology are interpreted. With his pen, the familiar becomes complex as he develops new interpretations and builds upon the contributions of many previous researchers.

In the preface and first chapter, Keegan focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of his narrative. He provides his own interpretation of how myth is expressed in practice, his main concern being “how beliefs structure, legitimize, and facilitate the negotiation of, and participation in, social groups” (p. xiii). He starts by presenting his personal theory of culture, which he believes necessary to contextualize his objectives, which explore (i) “how myth structured contacts between the Taínos and the Spanish and how myth and practice provided identities to the main characters”; (2) how “myth can have a physical representation, [as in the example of] Caonabó, the stranger king, [who came] to Hispaniola from a foreign land”; and (3) “how archaeological practice reproduces the myth of a stranger king” (p. 2).

If you ask an anthropologist or archaeologist to define culture, the joke goes, you will get as many definitions as there are anthropologists or archaeologists. In fact, of late culture as a core concept has lost favor in the field. Keegan goes...
back to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor’s “classic” definition: “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action” (page 4). He stresses the value of studying culture in its totality and rejects reductionist or positivist approaches.

Keegan also rejects the myth of the “objective” scientific observer and applies Bruno Latour’s model of “circulating reference” to explain how science works (p. 10). He explains that this more “chaotic model” can illuminate the study of culture, in that “culture is a complex, self-organizing and chaotic system represented as an n-dimensional hyperspace.” He then selects a core group of dimensions that represent general archaeological practice; these basic units of inquiry are then developed into various theoretical approaches. And rather than viewing these different approaches as oppositional dichotomies, he considers them part of the long continuum or “cloud of meaning” that constitutes culture (p. 14). Drawing from the analogy that you can know the chemical composition of clouds and how they form, but that this knowledge cannot predict the particular shape a cloud will take or how it will change, Keegan states that “Culture is a hyperspace cloud that we try to draw boundaries around. By recognizing n-dimensions we acknowledge a stochastic element to cultural processes. A single process does not necessarily produce one outcome or pattern, an investigator may not be able to specify all possible processes and outcomes as multiple-working hypotheses, and our answers are dependent on historical contingencies and scalar effects” (p. 15).

After bringing the concept of culture to the forefront of this analysis, and debunking the notion of the archaeologist as an objective observer and interpreter of the past, Keegan comes back to the historical contingency of the Spanish conquest of the Taíno, and specifically Caonabó’s capture and death, to interpret the role of myth in Taíno culture and social structure.

In chapter 2, “The Legend of Caonabó,” he recounts the historical narratives of the early Taíno-Spanish encounters in the Island of Hispaniola, specifically the events of Columbus’s second voyage, when he returns to find the men he had left at La Navidad dead, and Guacanagarí, the cacique of this region of Hispaniola, placing the blame on another cacique, Caonabó. Keegan relies on English translations of sixteenth-century Spanish sources—Columbus’ diaries, the histories of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and Fernández de Oviedo, and Fray Ramón Pané’s treatise on Taíno mythology, among others, to outline Taíno mythical beliefs and how they may have affected Spanish-Taíno interactions. In particular, he uses Las Casas’ assertion that Caonabó was a powerful cacique who was originally from the Lucayan Islands, to suggest that Caonabó was the principal cacique of Hispaniola, imbued with the mythical powers of the Stranger King. Through his analysis of the various accounts of Caonabó’s actions and final capture by the Spanish, he establishes the cacique’s importance, both as a historical and a mythical figure.

In chapter 3, Keegan begins by stating that Caonabó was one of the most powerful chiefs on the island, and that his capture was considered by the Spanish as “the defining moment of the conquest” (p. 51). He then provides an overview of Taíno archaeology in Hispaniola and the Bahamas, to determine specific sites.
where cacique Caonabó lived: the Corral de los Indios site in Hispaniola (the largest known village site in the West Indies), and, by a process of elimination, his probable village of origin, MC-6 on Middle Caicos Island. This overview also stresses the simultaneous presence of different ceramic cultures that may relate to the ethnographic Taíno, the differences in scale between Taíno settlements in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, and the fact that the Lucayan Islands were settled by Taínos and were part of their complex web of political and trade interactions, through the Caicos Island trade in salt.

Before delving into the specifics of the author’s archaeological research in the Bahamas, in Chapter 4, “Kinship and Kingship,” Keegan analyses the structure of Taíno chiefdoms and suggests that they were flexible enough in their political and social organization to accept a “stranger king” from the periphery of the Taíno culture area as a major cacique on Hispaniola. He postulates that the matrilocal, matrilineal societies that colonized the Greater Antilles developed into complex chiefdoms exhibiting avunculocal residence, as a result of internal warfare and population expansion (p. 119). He explains their emergence “was the creation of a power base through the localizations of males who were previously dispersed at marriage. The localization of males provided an underutilized labor force for the intensification of subsistence production, a military force for defense and expansion of territory, and organized long-distance trading expeditions for the purposes of creating and maintaining alliances that were cemented through the exchange of women in marriage. Succession is of supreme importance under these conditions. It thus became institutionalized in the social formation that MacIachlan and I called the avunculocal chiefdom (Keegan and MacIachlan 1989)” (p. 120).

Finally, Keegan comes full circle by pointing out a unique characteristic of the avunculocal chiefdom: “At each succession a stranger king arises, because the sisters of the cacique in one village are married to caciques in other villages in order to cement alliances” (p. 120). Thus, “the children who were born to these unions belonged to their mother’s clan and thus owed primary allegiance to their mother’s brother, who resided in another village. At puberty the boys would return to the village of their mother’s brother, where they competed to put themselves in the most favorable position to succeed their uncle to become cacique. Because some, if not all, of these boys arrived as “adults” from other villages, each would be received as l’etranger (perhaps a better term is l’inconnu)” (p. 121). Because the Lucayas were part of the Taíno chiefdoms’ sphere of influence through marriage alliances, and because these alliances were integral in maintaining these chiefdoms, Caonabó could have easily been a Lucayan who arrived as an “adult stranger” to succeed an uncle as a major cacique of Hispaniola.

In the concluding chapters, Keegan discusses the archaeological research undertaken by himself and, previously, by Shaun Dorsey Sullivan in the Turks and Caicos Islands. He discusses the difficulties of research in these islands, describes many of the sites located during archaeological surveys of these islands, and systematically lays out an argument for MC-6 in the Middle Caicos Island as the only site from which Caonabó could conceivably have come from. The intensive level surveys of the Turks and Caicos islands present a clear picture of how these islands were settled, and how these peripheral, but resource-strategic islands served as areas of export of materials such as salt and other marine resources to the cacicazgos of Hispaniola through the mechanism of marriage alliance.
Keegan describes Sullivan's work at MC-6 (mapping of the site, intensive surface collections and limited excavations) and his own work there decades later (including more extensive excavations of various structures at the site, more detailed faunal analysis and soil analysis), and concludes the following: MC-6 is a late prehistoric site which was occupied for a short period of time, circa AD 1300, until the Spanish contact; despite its shallow deposits, it was occupied year-round; and its layout is unique to the Bahamas, and resembles the chiefly villages of the Greater Antilles. MC-6 also has an earthwork and two plazas, one of them with a series of eight semi-pit features, about 5 meters in diameter around it. Following Sullivan, Keegan is interpreting these pits as houses (they may have been houses with “fish cellars” built to store perishable goods for later export, or, following Antonio Curet’s work in Puerto Rico, they may reflect a shift from extended to nuclear family domestic units) (p. 183). Keegan then attempts to identify where the cacique’s residence may have been located, and mentions Structure VIII (located at the eastern side of the site and exhibiting a two-chambered plan that ethnohistoric sources indicate were characteristic of chiefly dwellings) as a possibility. He also stresses that despite its unique layout, MC-6’s material culture is typically Lucayan, consisting mostly of undecorated Palmetto ware, and lesser quantities of imported vessels, stone and shell beads, shell inlays, and carved shells. He posits that MC-6 inhabitants enhanced their status by provisioning the Taínos from Hispaniola with foods (such as salt) and other goods, and that, as Las Casas identified Caonabó as a Lucayan, MC-6 is his probable homeland (p. 184).

Finally, Keegan turns to a spatial analysis of MC-6 to postulate that it was established to extract food and goods to supply chiefly villages in Hispaniola, that instead it was deliberately laid out to represent Taíno cosmological principles. He discusses how the Taínos used the rainbow as a symbol of the cacique and analyzes how the layout of MC-6 mirrors an ornament made from a human cranium that has been interpreted as representing the double rainbow (the cacique being the individual who could unify heaven and earth in the perfect circle formed by the double rainbow) (p. 187). He goes on to discuss various astronomical alignments associated with the structures of this site, and argues that it was built to symbolize a cacique’s power as legitimized by Taíno myth and cosmology. Coming full circle to the historical and legendary Caonabó, Keegan postulates that the Taíno social structure, based on marriage alliances, would allow for Caonabó’s mother, probably from a prominent Hispaniola family, to be married to the chief who resided at MC-6, and that Caonabó, upon reaching adulthood, returned to his mother’s brother’s village in Hispaniola to eventually succeed his uncle as the Cacique of Maguana (p. 194).

In conclusion, Keegan has taken the reader on quite an interesting and exhausting journey that traces a historical individual, Caonabó, beginning with the circumstances of his capture and death in the hands of the Spanish and going back to his origins in a Taíno outpost, site MC-6, in the Lucayan islands. Whether the story is true (after all, it is based solely on Fray Bartolomé de las Casas’ assertion that Caonabó was a Lucayan) at this point is irrelevant. The journey in itself, with the insights into Taíno social organization, culture, myth, and practice it has provided the reader is what matters most.