

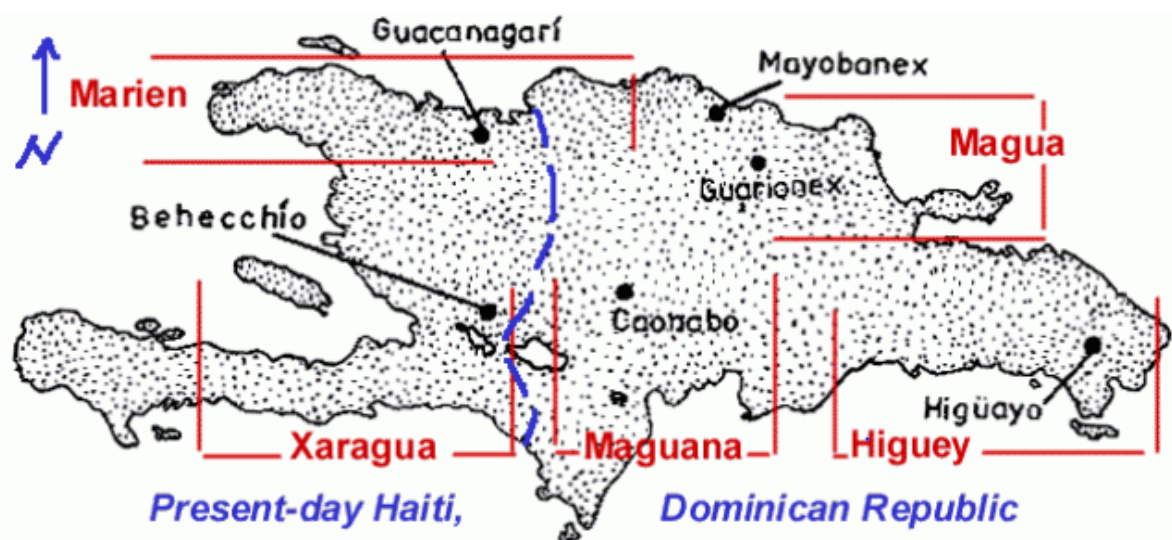
## The Taino



### Political

Political organization speaks to the way in which a people is governed or ruled. We ask questions such as, who are the leaders? What are the rules or system by which they are chosen?

The Tainos had a simple system of government. The **cacique** was the leader. He belonged to a special family. His post was hereditary. This means that it was passed down from father to son throughout generations. In a Taino society a female could inherit the position if her father, the cacique did not have a son. We know that there was a woman cacique ruling a province in Hispaniola when Columbus and his men arrived on their first voyage to the Caribbean.



Each island was subdivided into provinces or what we would call communities. The cacique was in charge of a province. He or she had several duties.

- Supreme judge
- Lawmaker - he made the laws and enforced them
- Chief priest
- Distribution of land
- Led ceremonies
- Fixed the day of worship and celebrations

There were very few laws. Firstly, the Tainos were a peaceful set of people who believed in and practiced clan-cooperation and respect for elders. They worked and played together in harmony. There were very few crimes.

The cacique was aided by a group of nobles known as **nitayanos**. They were to see to it that the orders of the chief were carried out. Each village had a village leader. This person was to see to the orderly day to day operations of the village. A number of elders were elected to the council of elders. Their wisdom was sought when difficult decisions were to be made.

A cacique had many privileges:

1. He was allowed to have more than one wife. This would increase his chances of having a male heir.
2. His house (**bohio**) was rectangular while all the others were round. His house was also the largest.
3. He was given the best of the crop.
4. A specially carved seat (**duho**) was given to him. This was his symbol of authority. On it he sat and dispensed justice or gave out the orders for the day.
5. He was not allowed to walk. He was carried about from place to place on a litter.

## **Social Organization**

The Tainos were organized along family lines. A number of families make up a clan and the clans made up the village and the villages formed the community.



*A Taino village*

## **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

The Tainos were polytheistic- they believed in many gods. They had a number of myths to explain the mysteries of life including earth and the creation of man. Their gods were represented by zemis which they made form wood, bone, stone or cotton. Each household kept a zemi to protect the family.

They believed in:

- The forces of good and evil
- Life after death
- Heaven (coyaba) and hell
- There is punishment in the afterlife for those who lived an evil life
- There is reward in the afterlife for those who lived a good life.

- The priest was the only one who could communicate with the gods (zemis)
- Offering food and meat offerings to the gods
- Using tobacco (incense) in the process of communicating with the gods
- Having festivals and celebrations in honor of the gods
- Keeping the gods happy (appeasing the gods)
- Offering prayers to the gods for healing, good harvest, protection and so on.



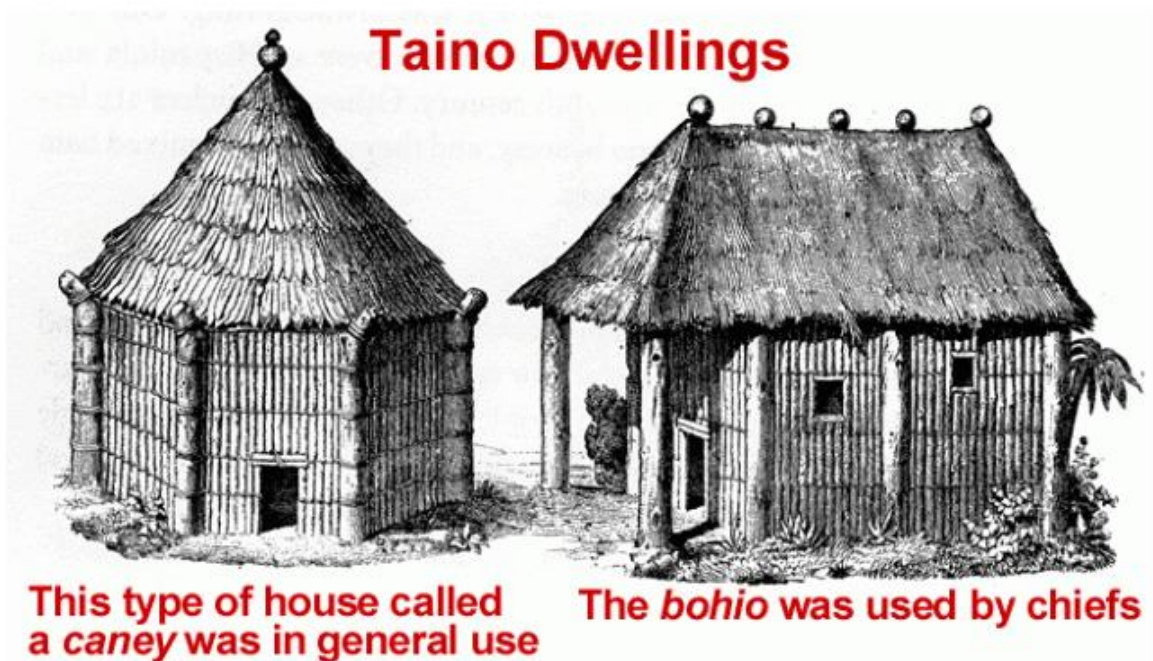
*Taino religious symbols*

## **Customs**

Every society has its own sets of customs and norms. This is what defines us and sets us apart from other people and countries. The indigenous peoples were no different.

1. They flattened the children's forehead as a mark of beauty.
2. They were a pleasure loving people. They played ball game called batos, swam and did wrestling.
3. Only men were allowed to smoke and drink
4. They got married early

5. Married men and women wore loincloth and cotton skirts respectively. The single people went naked.
6. The most heinous crimes were theft and adultery for which the punishment was a slow and painful death.
7. There was no private property, possession or wealth. Everything was owned collectively by the members of the community. (communally)



## **Gender relations**

Women were a very important part of the Tainos society. Gender relation is most clearly seen in the division and organization of labor. The women were responsible for the planting of the crops. It was believed that the fertility of the woman would transfer to the crop and vice versa. If she was barren, mother earth would transfer some of its fertility to her.

The women did the weaving so that the men and children could have loincloths and cotton arm bands to wear. They were to care for the children and the rest of the family while the men were away on hunting or fishing trips or out gathering food such as fruits.

The women were only invited to watch at wrestling matches and ball games. They were not allowed to participate. They formed the cheering committee.

## Production

These are the main activities that the Tainos did in their quest to provide food, 'clothing' and shelter for their people. They can be considered a step above the early hunters and gatherers.

## Hunting

They hunted conies (**utia/hutia**) and birds with nets and noose that they made from fibres and vines. They also hunted iguanas, agouti and snakes. They also went in search of and gathered wild plants and the bark of certain trees as directed by their priests to be used for medicinal purposes. In the hills of Trinidad and Jamaica for example a lot of wild fruits grew in abundance. These were gleefully collected and added to the main menu.



*Taino community showing farmers, hunters and community members*

## Farming

The Tainos practiced subsistence farming. That is they did not produce and store a surplus. They produced enough for the needs of the community. They practiced slash and burn agriculture. The men did the hard work of clearing the land. They used wooden axes to chop the branches from the trees and then set them on fire.

The women's duty was to do the actual planting. They planted roots, seeds and vegetables on their small plots of land or **conoucos**. They used pointed wooden sticks to dig holes and drop the corn grains in. corn or maize was their favorite starch. Then they covered them over with dirt. The ashes from the burnt tree provided fertilizer. Aided by the children they watered the crops as necessary. It was the children's duty to scare away birds from the newly planted seeds.

They grew a wide variety of crops such as:

**1.** Fruits: pineapples, guava, naseberry, cashew, soursop, papaya and grapefruit (the only citrus known to them before the coming of the Europeans)

**2.** Cassava



*Cassava roots*

**3.** Sweet potatoes

## **Fishing**

They would go fishing in the dug out canoes that they made. They used nets made of vegetable fibres, bone and turtle shell hooks and bone tipped harpoons. They had an ingenious method of attaching the remora or sucking fish to the canoe by a thin line. The fish would then dart after the remora hoping to eat it but would only succeed in getting itself sucked onto the powerful remora. The fisherman would then pull up the remora, take off the fish and deposit the remora once more in the water to wait for another victim.

Waterfowls were also caught by trickery. The Tainos would allow a number of calabashes to float on the river. The waterfowls became used to these harmless objects and paid them no mind. As soon as he was convinced that the fowls were relaxed, the Taino would place a calabash over his head and quietly slip into the water unnoticed. After a few minutes he would grab a nearby fowl by the legs, pull it under until it drowned and then put it in the bag that he carried with him.

They caught a wide variety of water animals such as: flying fish, shell fish, crabs and manatee.

## **Weaving**

Hammocks were a favourite item. They were used as beds or just to 'hang out' and catch the cool breeze. They also did baskets from straw. These were used as containers for the fishermen's catch.

## **Mining**

The indigenous peoples did not place much value on gold. They used it mainly as ornaments. The method of collecting gold was therefore very simple. They would dig a hole at the side of the river bank and let the water flow through it. They would examine the silt that was left behind. Any gold found was collected and given to those in charge of making decorative headdress for the caciques, masks for religious ceremonies or nose rings and bracelets.

## **1. Pottery**

## **2. Trading**

### **Trading**

Let us agree that trading would be limited. Why? First of all, they produced basically the same things. Secondly, the Tainos' villages were constantly raided by the Kalinagos. Thirdly, they did not engage in surplus production. They provided just enough for their own use. It was not safe to venture too far out at sea where the Kalinagos ruled the 'highway'.

Whatever trading took place was among the Tainos themselves. Different villages would contact each other when there was a need. It is interesting to note that the Tainos of Jamaica did engage in some amount of trading with the Mayans of Belize. If you follow on your map you will see that a straight line connects Jamaica to Belize. This is the route that the logwood people followed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Technology**

The Indigenous people lived in the Stone Age. They did not know iron. Their tools were therefore very simple. Most people consider their techniques and methods backwards when judged by modern methods.

**1.** The remora or sucking fish used in to catch fish

**2.** Bows and arrows used in hunting

**3.** Slash and burn agriculture

**4.** Fertilizer: ashes, animal and vegetable manure

**5.** Crude irrigation ditches

**6.** Crop rotation.

**7.** Fishing hooks made from bones

**8.** Fire used as a tool in canoe building

**9.** Dyeing



*Taino axe*