



THE
INDIGENOUS
PEOPLE OF THE
Caribbean



EDITED BY SAMUEL M. WILSON

The Indigenous People of the Caribbean

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Samuel M. Wilson

Organized by the Virgin Islands Humanities Council

University Press of Florida
Gainesville Tallahassee Tampa Boca Raton
Pensacola Orlando Miami Jacksonville

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02 01 00 99 98 97 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The indigenous people of the Caribbean / edited by Samuel M. Wilson.

p. cm.—(The Ripley P. Bullen series)

“Organized by the Virgin Islands Humanities Council.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8130-1531-6

1. Indians of the West Indies. 2. Indians of the West Indies—Antiquities. 3. Caribbean Area—Antiquities. 4. West Indies—Antiquities. I. Wilson, Samuel M. II. Virgin Islands Humanities Council. III. Series.

F1619.I53 1997

972.9*01—dc21 97-20170

The University Press of Florida is the scholarly publishing agency for the State University System of Florida, comprised of Florida A & M University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, Florida State University, University of Central Florida, University of Florida, University of North Florida, University of South Florida, and University of West Florida.

University Press of Florida
15 Northwest 15th Street
Gainesville, FL 32611

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Religious Beliefs of the Saladoid People

Miguel Rodríguez

The Europeans who arrived in the Caribbean in 1492 were surprised at the complex manifestations of Taino society, but they were not interested in promoting the aboriginal peoples' traditions, religious beliefs, or way of life. On the contrary, the valuable descriptions of Friar Ramón Pané, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas, Dr. Alvarez Chanca, Peter Martyr, and Adm. Christopher Columbus were used to justify the imposition of Western civilization and Christianity on the native peoples. These chroniclers described extensively the Tainos' physical aspect, the production of their handicrafts, and the exotic environment of the Antilles. Yet the intolerance and religious prejudice of these writers' era is evident in their distrust and lack of sympathy. And this bias means that even though their descriptions are extremely valuable documents, it is difficult to reconstruct a clear understanding of Taino religious beliefs from them alone (Pané 1974; Arrom 1975).

A still more difficult task is the study of the religious beliefs of those preliterate societies that flourished before the arrival of the Europeans: the Saladoids or Igneris, who colonized the Antilles twenty-five centuries ago, introducing agriculture and pottery-making to the Caribbean. According to the latest radiocarbon dates, there is scientific evidence of a Saladoid presence in Puerto Rico from around 300 B.C. (Haviser, this volume). Their varied cultural development lasted for almost a millennium, until the seventeenth century A.D. It is quite a challenge for archaeologists to reconstruct components of such a distant past (Siegel 1989).

A preliminary challenge has been determining just who these people were in the Caribbean. In the 1930s, Froelich (1930) named them Saladoids in their diet, named them Saladoids (1940). Later, focusing more on the archaeological evidence, he named them Saladoid. They are now an ethnographic term in use among archaeologists.

Since Rouse's work (1948a, 1948b), a single wave of Saladoid settlement is proposed for the region of Saladero in Venezuela and the east coast of Hispaniola. Puerto Rico has been divided into an earlier one called Cuevas—both terms in use in archaeological fashion, for the latter is not well covered. But in the last two decades, a distinction from those previously defined has been made in the Caribbean by Luis Chanlatte (1974), with La Hueca, on the island of Puerto Rico, and other sites (Narganes Storde 1984, 1989).

Some archaeologists believe that the Saladoid society had evolved in the Caribbean from an allegedly new cultural group that emerged in pre-Saladoid times. Others maintain that there are differences that may exist between the two groups significant enough to warrant a distinction. The most acknowledged authority on the subject offers a solution to the dilemma by suggesting a tradition: the Cedrosan Saladoid.

This chapter does not offer a solution to the dilemma. It discusses under a wide cultural umbrella the manifestations of both Cedrosan and Saladoid. These two populations were considered to have occupied the islands simultaneously, with the planting of cassava and the incorporation of the symbols.

WHO WERE THE SALADOID PEOPLE?

A preliminary challenge has to do with classification—that is, with determining just who these people were and when they arrived in the Caribbean. In the 1930s, Froelich Rainey, noting the large amount of crustaceans in their diet, named the earliest population the Crab Culture (Rainey 1940). Later, focusing more on ceramics than on diet, Irving Rouse renamed them Saladoid. They are also sometimes known as the Igneri, an ethnographic term in use among Lesser Antillean native peoples.

Since Rouse's work (1948a, b, and c), it has been generally accepted that a single wave of Saladoid settlers began a quick migratory process from the region of Saladero in Venezuela to the northeast of the Caribbean, stopping on the east coast of Hispaniola. The Saladoid population in Puerto Rico has been divided into an early phase called Hacienda Grande and a later one called Cuevas—both of these phases named, in conventional archaeological fashion, for the sites at which similar remains were first discovered. But in the last two decades a series of Saladoid sites that differ from those previously defined have been excavated in the northeast of the Caribbean by Luis Chanlatte Baik and I, among others. This is the case with La Hueca, on the island of Vieques, Punta Candelero on the east coast of Puerto Rico, and other sites in the Lesser Antilles (Chanlatte Baik and Narganes Storde 1984, 1989; Rodríguez 1989).

Some archaeologists believe these discoveries indicate that a separate society had evolved in the Caribbean *before* the arrival of the Saladoids. This allegedly new cultural group has been called variously Huecoid, Agro I, or pre-Saladoid. Others maintain that the chronological and cultural differences that may exist between pre-Saladoid and Saladoid cultures are not significant enough to warrant a new classificatory model. Rouse, still the most acknowledged authority in the archaeology of the region, has offered a solution to the dilemma by suggesting two subdivisions within the Saladoid tradition: the Cedrosan Saladoids and the Huecan Saladoids (Rouse 1992).

This chapter does not offer an assessment of that debate. Rather, I discuss under a wide cultural and chronological umbrella the typical cultural manifestations of both Cedrosan and Huecan Saladoids. We know that these two populations were closely related to each other and that they occupied the islands simultaneously, or nearly so. In addition, they initiated the planting of cassava and the pottery-making tradition in the Caribbean. They incorporated the symbolism of the South American fauna in their

artistic representations and developed a sophisticated technology in the carving of semiprecious stones. Both groups of settlers brought to the Caribbean their domestic dogs and plants such as tobacco and cohoba, used in rites and ceremonies. In this chapter I integrate the scarce archaeological information about these two groups that can lead us to general conclusions about the religious beliefs of the Saladoids as a whole.

Inferring religious beliefs and practices from the fragmented legacy of material culture is a challenging archaeological task, for religion belongs to the nonmaterial world of ideas, of the mind, of the feelings of an individual and a community. The task is especially difficult in the Caribbean both because early native life was already "archaeological" when the Spaniards arrived on these beaches at the end of the fifteenth century and because the material legacy—as is true in humid tropical zones generally—is very scattered and sparsely conserved. Fortunately, however, religious concepts are occasionally reflected in the artistic manifestations and the production of handicrafts as well as in the concrete evidence obtained in archaeological excavations.

I present here some observations that may be used as a guide for future studies—conclusions based upon information obtained from almost twenty years of investigation in Saladoid sites in the northeast of the Caribbean, especially in Puerto Rico and the island of Vieques and from more recent reports on other sites in the Lesser Antilles.

HUMAN BURIALS

Saladoid sites frequently contain evidence of human burials that reflect complex funeral rites and a clear ancestor cult. In the majority of cases, the bodies are found in squatting positions; they were also evidently shrouded, being firmly tied with vegetable fibers or hammocks. Eighty percent of the bodies studied in the Saladoid cemetery recently excavated in Punta Candelero, Puerto Rico, had been buried in this manner. The preparation and placing of them in a squatting position is a common religious practice in aboriginal cultures in the Caribbean (see Rodríguez 1989).

According to the reports on the graves that can be associated with the Saladoid culture, no fixed pattern exists with regard to their orientation to the cardinal points. Nevertheless, in Punta Candelero almost two-thirds of the 106 skeletons found were facing east—that is, toward the sea, the island of Vieques, and the rising sun. This orientation has also been identified in Taino burials and cemeteries, and obviously has cultural and religious significance.

In some cases the bodies were in objects of personal use, and valuable position makes it almost impossible when they are made of wood, cotton, we can be more certain of their identity objects of stone, bone, shell, and so on. In any event, the presence of such reincarnation (Calderón 1985).

Some Saladoid burials at Punta Candelero more clay vessels, generally placed in a squatting position, and, on occasion, covering almost all the islands of Puerto Rico, such as Punta Candelero. To be rough, undecorated domestic vessels' contents, many of them decorated with more substance than the containers themselves.

Gifts commonly associated with burials include amethyst, carnelian, serpentine, jade, and other stones, inside a small Saladoid vessel, together with other objects. In Punta Candelero, a string of fifty beads was found in the right hand of a male adult. In other cases, celts were also used as burial gifts.

One burial site at Punta Candelero was found in the shell of a freshwater turtle called *Trachemys*, with two small polished stones in the genital area, and was held by the right hand of the man. It is possible that in this particular case the man was buried as among the most valuable objects, not necessarily as a ritual gift. Turtle shells were used among the aboriginal cultures of the Caribbean.

The burial of children in Punta Candelero is also interesting. There is no evidence of skeletons of children. It is possible that because they were too young to be buried in the usual position, they were not considered as burials. In tropical aboriginal cultures, the burial of children is a common practice. On the other hand, there are burials of infants younger than five years of age in a large domestic vessel, like a funerary urn, as documented in late Saladoid sites such as

In some cases the bodies were interred along with pottery vessels, food, objects of personal use, and valuable burial gifts. In the Caribbean, decomposition makes it almost impossible for us to positively identify such gifts when they are made of wood, cotton, seeds, fruit, feathers, food, or fibers; we can be more certain of their identity when we find ceramic vessels and objects of stone, bone, shell, and other materials that resist decomposition. In any event, the presence of such gifts suggests a belief in an afterlife or reincarnation (Calderón 1985).

Some Saladoid burials at Punta Candelero were accompanied by one or more clay vessels, generally placed upside down over the head or the legs and, on occasion, covering almost all of the body. In the late Saladoid burials of Puerto Rico, such as Punta Candelero, the vessels used as gifts seem to be rough, undecorated domestic containers. It is possible that the vessels' contents, many of them decomposed, had greater ceremonial importance than the containers themselves.

Gifts commonly associated with Saladoid burials include amulets, accessories, necklaces, and strings of stone beads. Beads and amulets of quartz, amethyst, carnelian, serpentine, jadeite, and other green stones were found inside a small Saladoid vessel, together with a skeleton, at Hacienda Grande. In Punta Candelero, a string of fifty-four beads of milky quartz was found in the right hand of a male adult. Sometimes plano convex and petaloid celts were also used as burial gifts by the Saladoid people (Siegel 1989).

One burial site at Punta Candelero contained a less usual burial item: the shell of a freshwater turtle called *hicotea* by the Indians. The empty shell, with two small polished stones inside, was placed between the legs, in the genital area, and was held by the right hand of the deceased, a middle-aged man. It is possible that in this particular case the shell was a musical instrument buried as among the most valued possessions of the deceased and not necessarily as a ritual gift. Turtle shells are still used as musical instruments among the aboriginal cultures of Venezuela.

The burial of children in Punta Candelero deserves a special mention. There is no evidence of skeletons of newborns or young infants. It is possible that because they were too young to have passed through the initiation rites, they were not considered full members of the society. In some tropical aboriginal cultures, the bodies of infants are disposed of without burial. On the other hand, there are numerous documented burials of infants younger than five years of age. In these cases the child was placed in a large domestic vessel, like a funeral urn. This practice also has been documented in late Saladoid sites such as Monserrat, Luquillo, and Las Carreras.

In Punta Candelero, a green serpentine pendant was placed beside an infant inside of a vessel. At Las Carreras, a buried pottery vessel contained the skeleton of an infant and a shell trumpet.

Archaeologists have found that, in some of the later Saladoid sites, there were specific areas where the majority of the deceased of the community were buried. This seems to have been true, for example, in Tibes, Ponce; Punta Candelero, Humacao; and Maisabel, Vega Baja. In all of these sites the central plaza of the town was selected as the area for the cemetery, establishing as sacred the place where communal ceremonies and festivities, as well as routine domestic tasks, were performed. The Saladoid cemeteries studied are extensive and carefully planned, with few examples found of overlapping bodies. Of the 106 skeletons excavated at Punta Candelero, 80 percent were found in a small zone in the center of the village, with a high concentration of primary burials. The villages of Tibes in Ponce and Maisabel in Vega Baja were planned in the same way.

The early Saladoid sites lack such cemeteries. The human burials associated with the Hacienda Grande phase are scarce and scattered throughout the site, while individual burials or cemeteries associated with the Huecan Saladoid variant have not yet been found. Their absence may constitute a notable difference between the early and late phases of Saladoid culture.

CERAMIC ART

According to archaeologist Peter Roe, the Saladoid ceramic styles are among the most elaborate and complex of the early cultures of all the tropical zone (Roe 1989). Saladoid potters included in their ceramic production numerous varieties of containers and decorative techniques, such as the use of paint, delicately crosshatched incisions, incisions filled with paint, relief figures, applications, and combinations of all of these. Using such techniques, Saladoid potters showed a special fondness for the representation of personages, sacred animals, and fantastic creatures. The bodies and heads of zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and anthropozoomorphic figures and fantastical creatures were used to adorn the recipients and effigy vessels. All of these suggest a complex system of supernatural and mythical representations.

The ancestral sources for this expressive abundance must be in the tropical heart of South America. Yet the plastic representation of individual or combined elements, either realistic or abstract, of the South American flora and fauna cannot be interpreted simply as the desire to conserve ties with the ancestral culture, for the representation of mainland myths and sym-

bols is transformed and adapted. Algeria, for example, has such beliefs may have existed in the past. In art we find a replacement of some menacing fauna of the Caribbean islands of large land mammals and birds acquired more symbolic

Among the South American ceramic figy vessels, jars, and domestic vessels of significance to the peoples of the region, armadillos, alligators, turtles, and uars. The mythological connections are based on the South American tradition of the absence of live models, in the case of a docile jaguar. Its importance in the Saladoid cemeteries the remains suggest the same ritual and religious

One phenomenon peculiar to the Saladoid vessels is the representation of geometric elements. Occasionally one or more anthropomorphic figures. Given this peculiarity, the artists employed a variety of

One particular personage represented in Saladoid vessels throughout the region is the "god of the hourglass" since the eyes, nose, and even the head and parts of the body and face of the figure are made of the use of diverse geometric shapes, triangles, and spirals, as well as paint.

Since very remote times, the use of the cohoba and from the religious ceremonies led by priests, hallucinative and narcotic substances in the future, prophesying, and other activities. It is not surprising that religious practices were particularly in those associated with Punta Candelero. Huecan

bols is transformed and adapted to the Antillean environment. Ricardo Algría, for example, has suggested that the South American myths and beliefs may have existed in the Caribbean for some time, but that in Saladoid art we find a replacement of some of their elements by the smaller and less menacing fauna of the Caribbean (Algría 1978). With the scarcity in the islands of large land mammals, the native amphibians, reptiles, fish, and birds acquired more symbolic relevance.

Among the South American tropical fauna represented on Saladoid effigy vessels, jars, and domestic pottery are several that still have religious significance to the peoples of the continent. These include tapirs, capybaras, armadillos, alligators, turtles, monkeys, snakes, bats, dogs, and jaguars. The mythological connection between jaguar and dog clearly originated on the South American continent, but with the passage of time and the absence of live models, in the Antilles the figure of the dog evolved into a docile jaguar. Its importance becomes more evident when we find in the Saladoid cemeteries the remains of dogs buried in squatting positions, suggesting the same ritual and reverence given to humans.

One phenomenon peculiar to the painted designs of the early Saladoid vessels is the representation of anthropomorphic faces by a combination of geometric elements. Occasionally the repetitive geometric design conceals one or more anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or anthropozoomorphic figures. Given this peculiarity, we cannot discard the possibility that Saladoid artists employed a variety of artistic codes in different media.

One particular personage is represented constantly in the sample of Saladoid vessels throughout the region. Roe (1989) considers it to be the "god of the hourglass" since in the majority of the examples known, the eyes, nose, and even the head are depicted as hourglasses. The remaining parts of the body and face of this and other personages are defined through the use of diverse geometric forms such as circles, grecques, dotted lines, triangles, and spirals, as well as with applications and incisions filled with paint.

Since very remote times, the aspiration of a powder made from the seeds of the cohoba and from the leaves of tobacco has been a part of the religious ceremonies led by priests and shamans in the tropical region. These hallucinative and narcotic substances were used in the prediction of the future, prophesying, and communicating with spiritual beings. Hence it is not surprising that religious paraphernalia is abundant in the Saladoid sites, particularly in those associated with the Huecan Saladoids such as La Hueca and Punta Candeleró. Huecan sites contain a great variety of containers

designed for inhaling substances through the nose or ingesting special beverages.

Sometimes these ceramic artifacts are decorated with effigy forms that attain baroque artistic levels. Archaeologists have also excavated *incensaries*, thick-walled clay cylinders for burning herbs. In the later Saladoid sites, the presence of these ritual artifacts is less pronounced.

LAPIDARY INDUSTRY

Saladoid culture supported an active and sophisticated lapidary industry that is characterized by an abundance of small amulets and beads—items that represent a challenge for the artisan and reveal the presence of a complex iconographic symbolism (Chanlatte Baik and Narganes Storde 1984). The utilization of exotic raw materials such as amethyst, carnelian, quartz, aventurine, serpentine, and jadeite also promoted the development of an extensive trade network between the Caribbean islands and the South American continent (Cody 1991).

It is interesting that in spite of the profusion of early Saladoid amulets, beads, and other adornments, they were rarely used as burial gifts. The small size of these amulets may reflect incipient religious beliefs and practices, concentrated in the diverse family units. As such, their function could have been of an individual protective character and not as a symbolic representation of a religious figure or idea.

HISTORIC CONTINUITY

The continuity over time of some variants and elements of the Saladoid beliefs has been archaeologically proven. These are manifested in pre-Tainan and Tainan cultural components. The Saladoid images of the South American and Antillean fauna—such as the dog, which I have already mentioned—constitute one example of this continuity. They figure prominently in ancient histories and legends of the cycles of the creation of the world, the human interaction with the environment, and other themes. Many of them must have been modified considerably over the centuries. But some of their elements were in existence up until the time of the European conquest and were observed throughout the Antilles by colonial chroniclers.

A particular example of religious continuity is seen in the pre-Tainan and Tainan construction of large plazas and ceremonial centers above ancient Saladoid cemeteries. The pre-Tainan inhabitants of the Tibes ceremonial center in Ponce built their main plaza over an earlier Saladoid cem-

etry. This phenomenon seems of Puerto Rico and the Lesser

The inhalation of powders is also part of the Tainan religion. It differs slightly from the Saladoid practice of using wooden idols or *zemis* of wood and stone and other artifacts, a fact indic-

A final example is the presence of shell, coral, or stone, in the earth, in complexity and size during the period of political and religious power of chiefdoms.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I try to bring to light a problem that is difficult but not insoluble. The religious beliefs of the aborigines preceded the Tainos and of which the search model takes into consideration the historic documentation, and also common sense.

Let us remember that before there existed in Puerto Rico concerns very similar to those that concerned themselves with the utility of collective happiness; relations as the expression of their creativity and the development of a world of religious rituals as legitimate as our own.

etry. This phenomenon seems to be repeated in other archaeological sites of Puerto Rico and the Lesser Antilles.

The inhalation of powders and substances like cohoba and tobacco is also part of the Tainan religion. However, Tainan ritual paraphernalia differs slightly from the Saladoid examples. The Tainos incorporated large idols or zemis of wood and stone, spatulas used to induce vomiting, rattles, and other artifacts, a fact indicating a more structured and public religion.

A final example is the presence of small three-pointed figures, carved in shell, coral, or stone, in the early Saladoid sites. These artifacts developed in complexity and size during pre-Tainan times, becoming visible objects of political and religious power of the caciques and shamans of the Taino chiefdoms.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I try to bring attention to a cultural and archaeological problem that is difficult but not impossible to resolve: the study of the religious beliefs of the aboriginal society, particularly of the peoples who preceded the Tainos and of whom we have no written narratives. My research model takes into consideration archaeology, art, ethnography, ethno-historic documentation, and above all conclusions based on facts and common sense.

Let us remember that before the arrival of the Europeans in our world, there existed in Puerto Rico complex societies with authentic worries and concerns very similar to those of modern society: people then as now concerned themselves with the utilization of the environment; individual and collective happiness; relations among communities, islands, and continents; the expression of their creative and artistic capabilities; and the development of a world of religious rites, myths, ideas, and beliefs as complex and as legitimate as our own.