

The *Ciguapa* Speaks: Dominican Women in the 21st Century

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As with many other indigenous cultures, the feminine was an essential and equal partner with the masculine in the Taíno tradition. Taínos trace their genesis to the union of a male God named *Yucahu Maorocoti* and a fertility Goddess named *Atabey*. Other female Taíno deities include *Itiba Cahubaba*, *Mama Jicotea* or *Caguama*, *Guabonito*, and *Guabancex* (Arrom, 1975). From this record, we can deduce that the feminine had a significant role in the formation of the sense of self of our indigenous people. Also typical of other indigenous cultures, colonization fragmented the Taino holistic sense of self, but if we draw on our ancestral history, we can restore our wholeness.[1]

In many Dominican families, the stories of *Ciguapas* have been told from generation to generation. My paternal grandfather said that the *Ciguapas* would eat the crops of farmers who were not invested in doing good deeds for their community. He described the *Ciguapas* as women who would come in the middle of the night to seduce men. They had colorful long hair, hanging down to the earth, and their feet pointed backwards. Men were unable to follow a *Ciguapa* back into the forest, even if they tried, because their backward feet left tracks pointed in the wrong direction.[2]

In the territory of the soul, or psyche, and the differentiation of the self, the *Ciguapa* is a perfect metaphor to represent the leap into authentic selfhood, the discovery of who we are. As noted, the myth goes that the *Ciguapa* is a magical being who men follow into the woods. Following the *Ciguapa* symbolizes entering the land of no return, embracing death. Despite this threat of death, men pursue the beautiful feminine awaiting at the other end. In the countryside, but more so in the Cibao region (a fertile valley in the north of the country) of the Dominican Republic, people warn that if one encounters a *Ciguapa* and looks into her eyes, the person will forever be under her power.[3]

Two important concepts surface here. First, the patriarchal, inherited male fear of being transformed by the female; or, to put it in the language of Woodman (1990), “we come face to face with what is involved in a man’s response to his own inner feminine as anything other than a threat to his hard-won masculinity... The male fear of the feminine is deeply rooted in the dark mystery of the female body, a mystery women have secretly worshiped for centuries in rites traditionally identified with underground caves and equated with the Mother Goddess who in Christianity become the Mother of God himself” (p.20). Men are socialized to see the female energy as threatening.[4]

Second, the *Ciguapa* myth makes us aware that both men and women fear the feminine, but for different reasons; women too fear the feminine consciousness. Women are biologically similar to the *Ciguapa*, and that likeness can lead to what Woodman calls women’s “temptation of body power.” Therefore, in many cases women are trapped in a

female body but lack the consciousness of the feminine; encountering the Ciguapa within is a way for women to start the journey back home toward authentic selfhood. The concept of looking at the Ciguapa in her eyes and dying or falling under her power could suggest the surrender to the Divine Mother. This is the interpretation I favor in my intention to reclaim the Divine Mother within the Taíno tradition.[5]

As an archetype, the Ciguapa embodies the need of the psyche or soul for liberation, and at the same time, protection by embracing a secure sense of self. She can represent both transformation and safety. Like a great Mother, she settles in the depths of the unconscious. When the self/child feels unprotected, she flies to the forest, back to the womb, back to the Cave of the Jagua where, according to Stevens-Arroyo (2006) and others, the Tainos originated. For Dominican women and men, the Ciguapa is a mirror reflecting back a free spirit and the inalienable right of self-expression.[6]

Despite the crucial influence of women in the Taíno society, it is disheartening that the female contributions in preserving those influences are so far in the background that they are almost imperceptible. I am committed to a scholarship devoted to restoring the dualistic nature of our essence, and how our history was made by the contributions of both male and female forces. In this, I am also committed to inviting other women on the journey with me. We need to reconstruct our history in a way that is not fractional, but whole, and complete. Both women and men have historically failed, for the most part, to direct attention to that balance.[7]

Patriarchy is about denying women as equals, as counterparts, and that is why it is essential that the feminist movement be oriented toward recognizing the union of male and female so as to not err in the same manner. Again, in the words of Woodman (1990): “In forging a partnership of equals between the sexes — a partnership that belongs to the new creation — we need to be very sure whether we are negotiating a partnership as enemies whom our inherited prejudices have taught us to fear or as bride and bridegroom, each coming forth to greet the other” (14). What is needed is a resurgence of both feminine and masculine consciousness, in which the feminine recovers her inherent light, shedding the dullness and fatality through which history has presented her, and the male consciousness gets stripped of its aggressive mask. Most importantly, the projection of God or Goddesses needs to be experienced through our relationship with the world in all its integrity — mind, body and spirit.[8]

Dominican women need to reclaim their position as counterparts of their world, and scholarship must portray their contribution to the making of what is known as the Dominican Republic, or Quisqueya. We are not, and never were, passive spectators of our world, but an essential part of the energy that builds it.[9]

In the next section, I will draw on the voices of women who joined me in reclaiming the feminine images that authentically represent us as women and as generators of a political consciousness that makes us visible once again.[10]

Gender Roles Yesterday and Today

Women's roles in Taíno society were considerably varied and all social and political positions, including those of political leaders and artisans, were open to them depending, as with the men, on their social standing. Taínos were matrilineal—status, name, and property were inherited from one's mother and grandmother (Keegan, 1997). The pre-Columbian Taínos left art and artifacts behind that indicate women were key figures in their society. Historians have failed to highlight the influence of women in the Taíno world, a failure that has translated into a modern society that, for the most part, also denies the influence of women in Dominican political, social, and economic development (Medrano-Marra, 2007). The state of affairs in today's Dominican Republic shows a clear gender battle, which accounts for the male fear of being captured in the enchantment of the Ciguapa, the one who comes at night and steals them away, both seducing and abandoning them. For the male, it constitutes a moral obligation to safeguard their "maleness" and not to let the Ciguapa seduce them into the "feminine." What will transform us as a society will be the reintegration of the "feminine consciousness" in both men and women.[11]

The Taíno female deities were lost in a patriarchal world imposed by the Spanish colonizers, who brutally forced their monotheistic and masculine religion upon the indigenous people of the island. Colonization fragmented us on many planes but primarily on the spiritual plane. In the interests of exploiting the resources of the land, the Taínos were enslaved, and any resistance to the patriarchal religion of the colonizers was brutally and violently suppressed.[12]

The Taíno cosmogony encountered by the Spaniards upon their arrival was strong and thriving; it is only logical to infer that there was great trauma suffered by this people after their subjective world collapsed under the foreign intrusion (Medrano-Marra, 2007). The main interpretative conclusion reached in my study was that when women explored and assumed the knowledge of a Divine Feminine within their culture they felt empowered and that such empowerment restores wholeness. To be whole we must integrate the male/female energies that make us. True balance comes from the recognition of our multiplicity.[13]

Such trauma, such fragmentation opens a new inquiry: how is this trauma still impacting the collective unconscious of Dominicans, and, more specifically, of Dominican women? In pursuing this question, I conducted a study during 2006 and 2007 in which eleven women joined with me in attempting to address this inquiry.[14]

My Study of the Divine Feminine in the Taíno Culture: Deconstructing the Ciguapa Archetype

I invited the eleven women who took the journey with me to seek the archetypes underlying the Taíno culture. An archetype, as defined by C G. Jung, is a motif or symbol of our world that repeats itself in our fantasies, dreams, deliria or delusions. The archetype is not determined by its content—it is not an unconscious idea, but could be

determined by its form, as it speaks to our consciousness. The Ciguapa, as pointed out before, is seen as an archetype of the self.[15]

During my research, I watched in amazement as my coresearchers turned into tricksters or Ciguapas seeking their own internal balance, and reclaiming their innate ability to be wild and highly intuitive—to be La Ciguapa, that woman who lives high in the mountain regions. As I pointed out above, la Ciguapa has backward feet so that humans cannot follow her footprints, which also makes her into a trickster, who stands at the threshold of awareness and insight (Anderson, 1989). As a Ciguapa or trickster in my tradition, I gaze into the capacity of women to stand at the threshold of awareness and insight, and to penetrate the mysterious world of the ancestral mothers, in search of a road map for today's complex world.[16]

Personal Empowerment

Personal empowerment is as much about exercising political power as it is about navigating the waters of spirituality and finding one's soul and purpose. Personal empowerment is not possible without a sense of self. I agree with Cushman (1995) that:[17]

The self is configured in ways that both reflect and influence the very foundations of social life and everyday living. Without the guidance set by a particular set of ideas about what it means to be human, political conflict would be impossible. The shape of the self in a particular era indicates which goals individuals are supposed to strive toward, and how individuals are to comport themselves while striving; it indicates what is worthwhile, who is worthwhile, and which institutions determine worthwhileness. In other words, the self struggles. Once the self is set, the rest of the struggles begin to appear in the clearing: they materialize. (p.332)
[18]

In this sense, during my study of Taíno spirituality, personal empowerment was measured by our level of involvement in discussions of both the individual and society at large, and was strongly related to growth in relationships (Baker-Miller & Pierce-Stiver, 1997). The development of empowering and growth-fostering relationships is linked to the framework of the society from which the individual operates. The framework of the Taino society was more conducive to growth-fostering relationships because it was a more egalitarian one. My study of the Divine Feminine in the Taíno tradition was about creating relationships, among us and between us and the Divine Feminine, and to see how building relationships impacted our sense of self.[19]

The women who took part in my research revealed in their writings a notion of themselves as tricksters or Ciguapas, and in so doing they recognized the self as it

reflected in the Ciguapa archetype. Their writings show commitment to personal and societal changes, which reflect their political and spiritual consciousness. What follows is my translation into English of their original Spanish. To abide with the ethics of confidentiality I will use only the pseudonyms each participant chose and which are references to their Taíno heritage.[20]

Solenodonte, chose her name after the Taíno Solenodonte, a small shrew-like mammal with a long nose that eats ants. Solenodonte is a 42 year-old anthropologist and college professor, with specialization in gender studies. She describes her participation in the study on Taíno spirituality as follows:[21]

For the first time, I have found a group of women who are seeking to reencounter our ancestors to reveal the energy of the earth in totally different directions. I found the possibility to express myself openly, without fear and without feeling pressure around me. Spending time with women who are Ciguapas, wolves, and without fear, was stupendous. The spiritual experience of having been touched in my neck and head while awake and in daylight confronted me with the dilemma if whether I was hallucinating or if I truly had connected with my ancestors.[22]

Anacacuya is a 62 year-old writer and librarian who has written stories to reconstruct Taíno mythologies. In Taíno language her name means the “best cocoa.” In a retrospective piece she juxtaposes la Ciguapa to her experience as a modern professional woman and writer: [23]

What part of me is a Ciguapa? Ciguapas are creatures of the dense forest. I love the forest, I am an empiric botanist, and perhaps I should have been an archeologist-botanist, because I am passionate, for as far as I can remember, to discover new vegetation forms. My garden is an object of criticism from my neighbors, because I like the vines, the plants, the wild rose bushes that can grow wild. As a girl I used to play all day long in the cocoa field, and as I grew older, developed the gusto for hiding there, in the cocoa tree. I used to get lost from my family for hours. It was there I learned my love for silence and contemplation in solitude. The thing is that today, searching for the part of me where the Ciguapa still lives, I feel free from guilt when I accept that yes, I enjoy going out, without offering any explanation, so nobody can find me if I don't want them to. That is why retreats make me happy, the farther away, and the higher the mountain, the better. The Ciguapa in me starts embodying me, her being inhabits me, the air penetrates me, opening crevices, obstructed channels, the energy flows, moves, moves me, I shake myself, in perfect flow. I feel part of everything and from that feeling I speak.[24]

In her poem “To Find Essence of the Ciguapa” Anacacuya writes:

It is not be afraid of the shadows following
It is to leave tracks of mystery
always returning
getting lost in time
To be a woman
hear the earth’s heart
while close to the limbs of a tree
It is being a woman
without the inirirí tied to the body
and as God be who she is
The one who was seen and who exists
without resemblance
without tides
without descendents
always surprising history
the Ciguapa.[25]

Pitajaya, chose her name after an indigenous fruit. She is a 54 year-old lawyer and educator who writes:

I identify with the Ciguapa, although sometimes I go back and hide within like a turtle when something goes wrong, but instantly, I realize what I am doing and go back to the spirit of La Ciguapa.[26]

La Cacica, whose name means “female chief,” is a 47 year-old musician, autodidactic and pioneer in the study of Taíno rhythms. She has traveled throughout South America, Europe, the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. She reflects on the Ciguapa archetype through a poem:

La Ciguapa
I am a wild woman
of hills and rivers.
Human fruit
of nature.
I go alone through the forest
gathering food.
On the earth I find food for my body
in the air I find food for my spirit.
I am scared by the world’s cruelty
that is why I am elusive
and confuse others with my walk.
I don’t have a companion
I steal men from the hills
to procreate.

I am free,
I am part of the landscape,
I am rock, water fountain,
plants and animals.
I am beautiful and mysterious,
Unreachable, sovereign,
and untamable. [27]

Ciguita (indigenous bird), is 39, a psychologist, who was born in the Cibao region but lives in the capital where she works in the mental health field, specifically helping women redefine themselves, reflects:

I assume myself a Ciguapa, because I am free and I dare to do things. I am a Ciguapa because it has been difficult to let a man trap me. In the world of sex, I am wild, I get excited with odors, the mountains, the rain, and I love to hug trees. Nature offers the perfect combination, the contact with the tree, the scent of the countryside, rubbing bodies against each other. The contact with trees, with the earth, gives me palpitations, my breath accelerates and my conscience is altered. My chakras open. I am a Ciguapa because I also love to be alone. My autonomy and independence, even though they are relative, are signs of my Ciguapa nature. I resist any imposition (Ciguita, personal correspondence, December, 10, 2006).[28]

La Curandera, whose name means healer, a 38 year-old, was born in Santo Domingo, graduated with a bachelors in business administration, to then study flower therapy, Reiki, and massage therapy. She is the mother of two children and owns a salon spa. She states:

In thinking about the Ciguapa in me, words such as “fierce, surviving, instinct, ability to detect danger, living in communion with others, self-perception, and freedom” come to mind.[29]

Ciguaparrasta was the youngest of the co-researchers. Only 26, she was born in the Cibao region. She is a singer of the Taíno tradition and currently works with children in the countryside of La Vega.

The reencounter with my feminine side reflects in the way I respond to difficult situations now. This week, I was able to solve problems that before I would just not even try, afraid of losing the battle before starting it. Now, in the last 2 months, I realized that spirituality is not about a mysterious world in which I have to submerge myself to discover the indescribable. No, now my spiritual world is as real as everything material.[30]

Violeta, chose her name after the flower. She is 40, a computer engineer and a single mother of two boys, she reflects:

I identify with the archetypes of la Ciguapa and the Turtle or Jicotea; with the Ciguapa, because she represents freedom, wildness, silence, love, pleasure, and defiance. With the Turtle, because I am slow in doing things but very assertive in taking my own decisions, regardless of others' approval.[31]

Campeche, 41, chose her name after the town of Campeche. She is a single mother of a son, with a background in business administration. She works extensively with women and with gender issues. She boldly states “throughout the study, I learned to connect with the land, and I found a new image to represent myself, I am a Ciguapa.”[32]

Beyra, 38, chose her name after the Goddess Atabeyra. She is an actress, dancer, yoga master and theater director and producer. With her parents, in 1999, she founded a cultural center in the heart of Santiago, where students have the opportunity to explore different corporal and spiritual practices. She asserts:

I want to understand my spirituality and my femininity. At school we learned about Greek Goddesses, and we tried to understand the beauty secrets of the Egyptian women, the struggle for women's rights in America in the 1920s, but our history is forgotten — we don't learn about how these first inhabitants lived. To learn how they lived, what kind of things they respected and why, what were their pains and their joys, to what did they sing and how did they sing it, is not taught. The more I learn about them, the more I learn about myself.[33]

How the Ciguapa Empowers Us

As an archetype of liberation and encounter with the self, La Ciguapa has impacted us greatly. For instance, the coresearcher who used the pseudonym of Ciguapa, chose such because she felt it really depicted the transformation that she underwent throughout the research. Ciguapa is a 57 year-old college professor and gay-lesbian activist. During an Areito (Taíno celebratory ritual) she depicted her transformation by jumping out from behind a tree to show her emergence as a Ciguapa, or woman who is no longer willing to live according to the status quo but who is seeking to find her own definition of self. She writes:[34]

The Ciguapa in me starts embodying me, her being inhabits me, the air penetrates me, opening crevices, obstructed channels, the energy flows, moves, moves me, I shake myself, in perfect flow. I feel part of everything and from that feeling I speak (La Ciguapa, personal correspondence, December 8, 2006) [35]

My coresearchers all agreed that the Ciguapa is an archetype that speaks to their perception of being an empowered woman. When asked why the Ciguapa had such an impact on them, they all reported feeling truly mirrored by the Ciguapa's love for freedom and for this archetype's disdain for the status quo. Even the three participants for whom the Ciguapa was less well-known reported finding affirmation and validation in this archetype. My research started a dialogue that I believe needs to continue.[36]

Where are the Ciguapas in the 21st Century? They are in colleges and universities, they are sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, artists, writers, mothers, lovers, and community activists seeking to restore their places in the making of tomorrow.[37]

Feminine and male energies make us whole, and the absence of either renders us incomplete. The European colonization established the masculine as dominant and the feminine as subordinate, severing a sacred relationship. The separation of energies constituted a trauma that has permeated our collective unconscious. The Ciguapa relates to the female energy running away, and yet coming back at night, in the dark, trying to find her place. I propose here that both men and women need to reencounter their Ciguapa nature to restore balance in our modern society.[38]

Spirituality and politics are not separate. I understand spirituality as all that is inside and outside us. With that in mind, I am going to depart from the spiritual background of my people, to understand how ill politics have buried women's contributions and most importantly how healthy politics can restore our place in history. Recognizing that the personal is political has been the key to women's advancement worldwide. Reclaiming our dualistic nature, our female/male force empowers us. Taíno sacred practices can help Dominican women and men decipher a different way of being in their environment—more self-confident, empowered, harmonious, and intuitive, like the Ciguapa archetype.[39]

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Article submitted: 22 May 2008
Reviews completed: 12 June 2008
Published: 27 July 2009

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Marianela Medrano-Marra is a writer, transpersonal psychologist and keeper of the Taíno tradition. Her doctoral dissertation studied the spirituality of the Taíno people. More specifically, her research was an inquiry into the elements of Taíno spirituality that can sustain women's self-perception and enhance their self-esteem. She worked with 11 Dominican women who came from a variety of backgrounds—writers, psychologists, anthropologists, musicians, educators, and so on. The main interpretative conclusion they reached was that when women explored and assumed the knowledge of a Divine Feminine within their culture they felt empowered.

Citation

Please cite this article as follows: Medrano-Marra, Marianela. (2009). The Ciguapa Speaks: Dominican Women in the 21st Century. *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology* [On-line Journal]. Available at: <http://kacikejournal.wordpress.com/marra> [Date of access: Day, Month, Year]. [39 par.] © 2009. Marianela Medrano-Marra. All rights reserved.
