

The Dark Side of the Shaman: The Evidence for Sorcery in the Antilles

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Abstract: The scholarly work on the Taíno *behique* and the Kalinago *boyé* has always acknowledged the position of power that these figures occupied in their societies. Their quality as a mediator with superhuman forces made them vital for indigenous Caribbean communities in their role as healers, advisors, ritual specialists, or even craftsmen. However, it has not often been stressed that the principle of the “unity of knowledge”, i.e. that which can heal can also harm, also applies to Caribbean shamans and that this perhaps constitutes a darker, but equally powerful part of their social roles.

This paper discusses the available evidence for shamanic reciprocal violence (i.e. sorcery) among the contact time Kalinago and the proto-contact Taíno. After this discussion I will briefly try to infer what this could possibly mean for our understanding of the exchange and socio-political system of these societies.

Résumé: Le travail scolaire sur le *behique* de Taíno et le *boyé* de Kalinago a toujours reconnu la position de la pouvoir que ces figures ont occupée dans leurs sociétés. Leur qualité comme un médiateur avec les forces superhumaines les a rendues essentielles pour les communautés indigènes des Caraïbes dans leur rôle comme médecins, conseillers, spécialistes rituels, ou même artisans. Cependant, on n'a pas souvent noté que le principe de la « unité de la connaissance », c.-à-d. cela qui peut guérir peut également nuire, s'applique également aux shamans des Caraïbes et que ceci peut-être constitue un plus obscur, mais partie également important de leurs rôles sociaux. Cette article discute l'évidence disponible pour la violence réciproque chamanique (c.-à-d. sorcellerie) dans la société des Kalinago de les temps historique et dans les sociétés Taíno des temps proto-historique. Après que cette discussion que j'essayerai brièvement d'impliquer ce que ceci pourrait signifier pour notre arrangement du système échange y sociopolitique de ces sociétés.

Resumen: El trabajo escolar sobre el *behique* de Taíno y el *boyé* de Kalinago ha reconocido siempre la posición del poder que estas figuras ocuparon en sus sociedades. Su calidad como un mediador con las fuerzas sobrehumanas los hizo vitales para las comunidades indígenas del Caribe en su función como curadores, consejeros, especialistas rituales, o todavía artesanos. Sin embargo, no se ha tensionado a menudo que el principio de la “unidad del conocimiento”, es decir el que puede curar puede también dañar, también se aplica a los chamanes del Caribe y que esto quizás constituye un parte más oscuro, pero igualmente importante de sus funciones sociales. Este papel discute la evidencia disponible de la violencia recíproca chamanica (es decir hechizo) en los comunidades del Kalinago en el tiempo histórico y en los sociedades Taíno de el tiempo proto-contacto. Después de que esta discusión que intentaré brevemente deducir lo que podría significar ésta para nuestra comprensión del sistema de intercambio y sociopolítico de estas sociedades.

Introduction

The importance of ritual specialists in the socio-political system of the indigenous people of the Caribbean has often been stressed by archaeologists. The most famous example of these ritual specialists are of course the Greater Antillean *behiques*, but another well known example is the *boyé* of the Island Carib, or Kalinago as they will be referred to here. Through historical sources of the contact period Caribbean, archaeologists have come to understand that various roles were ascribed to these shamanic specialists in their respective social and political systems. These ethnohistorical sources suggest that these specialists were probably simultaneously perceived as healers, priest-like figures, craftsmen, and counsellors to a big man or *cacique* (Roe 1998). The *behique* or the *boyé* could fulfil these tasks because he, or perhaps she, had the power and privilege of being capable to communicate with beings that were outside the realm of day-to-day human interaction. This view of shamanism in the Caribbean is congruent with what we know of contemporary shamanic systems of the South American tropical lowlands (Matteson Langdon and Baer 1992).

Dark Shamanism and the Unity of Knowledge

Aside from healing, crafting, and dispensing advice through superhuman mediation, there is another shamanic practice that is pervasive in shamanic systems of Lowland South America, but which has nevertheless not received proper attention as a functional social mechanism in indigenous Caribbean society. This practice is the shaman's ability to commit damaging acts of sorcery (Whitehead and Wright 2004b). It is strongly believed that through his magico-religious capabilities it is possible for a shaman to assault another individual or an entire community through non-physical means. From the earliest contact period this type of shamanism was immediately recognized by Europeans and seen as homologous to the European practice of witchcraft, but a simple conflation of these practices do little to further the understanding of Lowland South American sorcery (Narby and Huxley 2004: 11-16). Nevertheless, the dark side of shamanism, as it is more aptly called by Whitehead and Wright (2004a) is of course not confined to Lowland South America alone. Actually, the analysis of "withcraft" is prominent or at the core of many of the first anthropological analyses of shamanic systems (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1976; Frazer 1922; Malinowski 1922: Chapter 10; Mauss 2001). Although it had been underexposed for some time, the discussion on dark shamanism in Lowland South America has received a little more attention lately, with various publications on the subject (Mansutti Rodríguez 2003; Whitehead 2002; Whitehead and Wright 2004a).

Even though it is difficult to find universally prevalent elements in sorcerous activities in Lowland South America, one thing is evident: in Western stories of sorcery there is an institutionalized opposition between witchcraft, that is connected to the devil, and religious activity, connected to the all-powerful God and Heaven (Douglas 1991). This contrasts with Lowland South America where the distinction between light and dark shamanism is blurred. This is because practitioners of both dark and light shamanism use similar techniques, often invoke the same spirit helpers to heal or to harm, and sometimes an individual is both a dark and a light shaman (Whitehead 2002). In the words of Mary Douglas (1966), there is a "unity of knowledge." This universal idea of the unity of knowledge is the reason that doctors nowadays take the Hippocratic Oath, promising not to do harm in the practise of their profession, and also the reason why shamans are such feared and powerful individuals. In short, those who can cure can also kill.

Surprisingly, in the interpretation of the role of the shaman in Pre-Columbian times it is often not taken into account that the shaman could also have had negative qualities.¹ Arguably, this is partly caused by the problems associated with identifying patterns of generic shamanic practice in the archaeological record, let alone specific subvariants of shamanic activity (Price 2001).

The only other sources of information on Pre-Columbian shamanic systems in the Caribbean are historical records. Naturally, these sources have their own range of interpretational problems (Rabasa 1993). For example, early chroniclers did sometimes not distinguish between “dark” and “light” shamanic practices in what to their eyes were idolatrous practices of religious specialists, in service of the Devil (Oviedo y Valdes 1851). In addition, dark shamanism tends to be more obscure than light variants of shamanism (Whitehead and Wright 2004b). Many ethnographers interested in the subject find that even nowadays the dark side of shamanism is very difficult to research, since informants are often very reluctant to talk about it out of fear for retaliation by practitioners of dark shamanism. Still, I argue that the sources detail that dark shamanism must have been a more important part of the Caribbean shamanic systems than the existent scholarly literature has stressed so far. Here, I will discuss the ethnohistorical evidence for dark shamanism among the Kalinago, followed by a speculative discussion of the dark side of the *behique*.

Kalinago Dark Shamanism

One of the most valuable sources of information on Kalinago worldview is, of course, the dictionary of Breton, which he compiled during his missionary work from 1642 to 1654 in Northwest Dominica (Breton 1999 [1665]).² In his dictionary he translates many Kalinago words and sentences into French and writes extensive comments on them as well. Given that Breton was a Dominican missionary, it is not surprising that he had a special interest in the magico-religious practices of the Kalinago and therefore his work contains a corresponding amount of information on Kalinago shamanism as well. This provides a unique venue for research on the *emic* understanding of the shamanic system of an indigenous people of the Antilles.

Breton devotes several pages in total to a discussion of shamanism and related concepts. What can be learned from these is that the Kalinago shaman, the *boyé* or *boyáicou* engages in all of the activities expected of a magico-religious specialist. He enfoldes these activities by mediating with the spirits in a trance induced by inhaling tobacco (see Wilbert 1987 for an overview of this practice). By this the *boyé* is able to give counsel in times of war, lead ritual gatherings and, most important of all, cure illnesses by sucking the disease out of the diseased person (Breton 1999 [1665]: 109).

So, the *boyé* knows how to treat these diseases by virtue of his mediation with superhuman beings, but — following the principle of the “unity of knowledge” — Breton also presents some discussion that all of the diseases and other harm that visits the Kalinago were caused by spirits in the first place. As Breton says (1999 [1665]: 136, my translation): “I saw an old man who was a little bald, who complained that someone had bewitched him, as if one did not become bald other than through sorcery.”

Balding does seem to be a curse to some men, but it can hardly be considered life-threatening. So, even though it is not so harmful, this fact of life is still perceived to be an act

¹ With the exception of Roe (1998: 138) who mentions, but does not discuss sources on shamans producing negative value through sorcery.

² I am only concerned with Kalinago cosmovision here, for an extensive overview of Kalinago social, cultural and political practices there is a nice range of literature available (e.g. Boomert 1986; 2009, this volume; Honychurch 2000; Taylor 1938).

of sorcery. However, this statement is also informs us what the source was of any type of harm that befell the Kalinago through non-physical means. When analyzing Breton's information further there seem to be three principle causes of disease and harm in the Kalinago view of things (Breton 1999 [1665]: 136 & 171). First and foremost there is the "God of the *Boyés*" that, according to Breton, they fear the most. In other entries of the dictionary and other ethnohistoric records on the cosmovision of the Kalinago, we find out what was most likely the name for this god: Mapoya (De La Borde 1684). Although notions of absolute evil versus absolute good belong more to a Western ethical system than that of the indigenous people of Lowland South America and the Caribbean (Descola 1996), Mapoya seems to be a god that is primarily connected to the production of negative value. He is the counterpart of the creator god "Icheiri" and is believed to be the one who causes solar and lunar eclipses because he eats the spirits of the sun and the moon. I do not know why Breton points to Mapoya as being the "God of *Boyés*." In other parts he seems to attest that all *boyé* had their own god, which would seem congruent with the idea of spirit-helpers. Also, it is often the case in lowland South America that the god of the shamans is also the creator god, which in this case would be Icheiri. A possible answer to this could be that, as Stephen D. Glazier had already suggested in the 8th congress of the IACA, Mapoya is not one single being, but a class of spirit beings (Glazier 1980).

Evidence supporting this can also be found in Breton's dictionary that identifies a class of spirits called *mapoya* or *opouyem* as a second being that causes sickness and harm. It is difficult to say exactly what type of spirits the *mapoya* were. The prevalent notion is that *mapoya* were the spirits of the dead that came back to haunt them. More specifically, following Breton, *mapoya* were those parts of the human spirit that would remain on earth and resided in the arms and testes. Breton and various other sources state that the feared and hated *mapoya* were the superhuman beings that were responsible for the melancholic and reticent mental state of some of the Kalinago. They were so moody because their sleep was haunted by a black smoke that caused them nightmares, in which they dreamed they were taken by *mapoya* that beat them up (Breton 1999 [1665]: 171).

"If I saw them being in sorrow, I [...] would] wake them [...] and some of them would have readily thrown themselves to their knees to thank me because I had defended them (they said) from *mapoya*, which beats them,"

There were other type of spirit beings that were dangerous according to the Kalinago, such as the seaspirt *oumecou* (Breton 1999 [1665]: 211; Taylor 1938), but the dream-assaults were always caused by *mapoya*. Nevertheless, the *mapoya* seems not to have been a purposeful agent in every attack. Sometimes it was just a tool used to attack *with*. At these times the *mapoya* would have been sent by someone to inflict harm to an individual. Following Breton, the Kalinago word for such a type of person was *nharomán mapoyanum*. The exact grammatical structure of the Kalinago language is lost, but we can see that the morpheme *-nharo-* is also at the root of the word for sorcerous spell (*línharonê*, Breton 1999 [1665]: 136) and being under the effect of a spell (*ínharoánnum*, *ibid.*: 151). *Mapoya* is of course at the basis of *mapoyanum*. Thus, the *nharomán mapoyanum* was a shaman that could use sorcerous spells to control *mapoya*. So the last being that caused harm to the Kalinago is not a superhuman agent, but the human *nharomán mapoyanum* (Breton 1999 [1665]: 172).

In the cases in which a specific person is identified as someone who controls *mapoya*, they are most often females. Sieur de la Borde (1684) tells us that these females would then often be killed, however he also says that they do not identify men as sorcerers because they would not dare to attack them so openly. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether they would be a distinct class of shaman or that the capability to control *mapoya* was something that any *boyé* had. La Borde and Breton both state that the *boyé* had the capability to suck out the evil given through a sorcerous spell, that then materialized in the hand of the *boyé* as a

stone or an arrow point. They also had the power to identify the one that had sent this illness to them. Boyés would be heftily rewarded for this service and needless to say the possibility to identify anti-social elements gave them a pivotal role in the Kalinago socio-political system. This would correspond to a shamanic system in which the *boyé* would have been caught up in shamanic wars with the *boyé* having the role of protector against the assaults from dark shamans, like *nharomán mapoyanum*. A similar system can still be found in many contemporary shamanic systems of Lowland South America (Whitehead 2002). However, as said, one should not take these divisions between light and dark shamans as strictly bounded spheres of power and knowledge, since many light shamans dabble in the dark side.

Indeed, Breton's dictionary presents evidence that the Kalinago were at least familiar with the notion that — what they identified as — a *boyé* could also cause illness instead of cure it. *Outácabou* is the name for the pain that is given through sorcery, one example of this being painful chronic gout. Breton remarks in the entry on *Outácabou* that “they believe that it is the *boyés* of the mainland and their Gods that sent them these evils” (Breton 1999 [1665]: 212). Perhaps *boyé* is meant as a general term for shaman here or maybe these were literally mainland “colleagues” of the Kalinago *boyé*.

These references on acts of sorcery by shamans are only present in a few ethnohistorical documents and therefore can be questioned as being fictitious. Fortunately, the thorough ethnographic works of Douglas Taylor from the beginning of the 20th century also discuss aspects of dark shamanism in Kalinago society (Taylor 1938). He states that there was a type of superhuman agent that was controlled by *piäimen* and these were seen to be responsible for all death and serious disease. This allows us to extrapolate the ethnographic reality of dark shamanism in the Caribbean to the ethnohistoric documents and separate perceived facts about shamanic individuals and capabilities from historical fiction.

Greater Antillean Dark Shamanism

An argument that extrapolates ethnohistoric fact to a different region and time is a lot more tentative. Still, that is exactly the continuation of this argument in a brief discussion of ethnohistorical data that could indicate that dark shamanism was also practised before and during the proto-contact phase in the Greater Antilles.

First of all, there are no direct references to the practice of dark shamanism to be found in the early ethnohistoric sources, but there are some tantalizing leads. To start with one can take a look at certain shamanic concepts as they are present in the much abused work of Pané (Pané 1999 [1571]). Without suggesting that Greater Antillean Late Ceramic Age shamanism and worldview was homologous to late contact Kalinago shamanism and worldview, we do find some analogous notions among the two shamanic systems. First of all there seems to be a correspondence between the functions that the Kalinago *boyé* fulfilled, vis-à-vis those that the Greater Antillean *behique* carried out. Both were curers, advisors and leaders of ritual gatherings. Additionally, an alternative Kalinago term for *boyé*, *boyáicou*, is reminiscent of the Greater Antillean *behique*. A similar case can be made for a variant of the Kalinago word for *mapoya*, *opouyem* (Breton 1999 [1665]: 212). This word resembles the Greater Antillean *opía*, which is a well-known term from Fray Ramon Pané's “Account of the Antiquities of the Indies” (Note 87 by Arrom in Pané 1999 [1571]: 19)

In Pané's account the *opía* is discussed together with the *guaíza*. Where the *guaíza* is the spirit of the living person, the *opía* is, similar to the Kalinago *mapoyo*, the spirit of a deceased person. These spirits can appear like a regular person, except for the fact that they do not have a navel. Analogous to the *mapoya* the *opía* is much feared. The fact it only comes out at night is stated as the reason why the people that gave Pané this information were afraid to venture out alone at night. The *opía* sometimes lure unsuspecting men into the forest, but

Pané does not directly attribute malignant qualities to them. Exactly why the *opía* are feared is not known. In this respect the *guaíza* seems to be more dangerous, since men that wanted to fight it, ended up hanging from a tree (Mol 2007; Pané 1999 [1571]).

Obviously, some muddled notion of spirit agents that we confer from a copied version of a manuscript that is written down by someone with an imperfect understanding of the language and culture is a far cry away from evidence for dark shamanism in the Late Ceramic Age Greater Antilles. There are however, some other excerpts that provide further clues. Las Casas states, in his discussion of the treatment of sick people in Hispaniola, that they would place sick and dying persons far outside the house, because of the fear of *hupias* (Las Casas 1875: Book III, Chapter 204). If a sick person would die in a house his *hupia*, or *opía*, spirit would stay at that place and assault the remaining inhabitants. In this excerpt he also claims that it were the *behiques* that interacted with the *opía* and by this frighten their people and cause problems. Although, it has to be said that Las Casas was subjective towards the devil worshipping *behique*, to my mind, this excerpt hints at the use of shamanic powers by the *behique* in order to produce negative value.

Additionally, it is necessary to make a remark on the relation between the *behique* and *zemi* idols. The fact that *behiques* could interact with and possibly have some control over *zemis* that had the power to cause sickness or harness the destructive powers of nature, such as *Baibrama* or *Guabancex*, is also in line with a more sinister view on their role as magico-religious specialists (Oliver 2009; Pané 1999 [1571]: 27 & 29).

Finally, when returning to Pané, one can read that *behiques* were not always looked upon favourably. In a piece on the treatment of disease by the *behique*, Pané explains what happens to a *behique* when he was the cause of the death of a sick man (Pané 1999 [1571]: 21-25). According to Pané, when a well-connected sick man had died another *behique* would lead a ritual in which they poured a drink called *gueño* in the mouth of the dead man and would ask whether he died through the fault of the *behique* or because he did not keep the diet. If they find out that the man died because of the *behique*, they will exact revenge at some point in the future by clubbing him to death. In this case, this excerpt has always been read as a way of punishing a *behique* that did not manage to cure a sick man. However, in an alternative reading, one could suggest that the family members exacted their revenge on that particular *behique* who *caused* the sickness, instead of on an unsuccessful and hapless doctor.³

Implications and Conclusion

One could say that the underrepresentation of dark shamanism in scholarly works dealing with the shamanic system of the Caribbean is deservedly so and one might wonder why I have devoted so much time to such an insubstantial practice of Caribbean shamanism. I, however, would deem dark shamanism important for our understanding of the indigenous people of the Caribbean for the following reasons.

First, through various aspects of its material culture we are beginning to see a picture of an interconnected Caribbean region in which interaction patterns were intensive and extensive. Dark shamanism would fit in this pattern as one of the many lines of reciprocal relations. On the one hand the distribution of dark shamanic knowledge and tools might itself be part of patterns of esoteric interaction (Allaire 1990). Additionally, the exchange of acts of

³ This is congruent with revenge taken on *kanáima* dark shamans among the Wai-wai of Guyana (Whitehead 2002: 228)

shamanic violence would be another reciprocal pattern that is to be expected in an interconnected and animistic Caribbean social universe.⁴

In addition, discussions of patterns of violence itself have always centred on the peaceful nature of the indigenous people of the Greater Antilles and the warlike nature of the “Island Caribs” (Allaire 1987). There is the traditional notion that the indigenous people of the Greater Antilles did not engage in raiding behaviour and were peaceful and docile, to which a counter-reaction is now taking place (Redmond 2007; Siegel 2004). Adding to this, recent investigation among several indigenous groups in Guyana and Amazonia that were typically characterized as “peaceful” has shown that these groups are nevertheless much feared by their neighbours (Mansutti Rodríguez 2003). Although these groups abhor physical violence they do engage in shamanic violence and are actually seen as highly potent in dark shamanism. I propose that a similar situation would not be unthinkable for the Late Ceramic Age and early contact Greater Antilles.

Archaeological evidence is understandably scant for such an ethereal practice as dark shamanism. Although, I would tentatively suggest that dark shamanism is an explanation for the plethora of anthropomorphic and batlike forms encountered in the iconography in the Greater Antilles (García Arévalo 1998; Roe, et al. 1997). In an environment where no large predators are present, it could be that malignant spirits and those that control it were perceived as the most dangerous predators and antisocial elements of society and hence the most depicted iconographic elements.

Finally, if they would be able to produce negative value through dark shamanism as well as positive value through dispensing advice and healing this would further explain the great prestige that was awarded to *behiques*.⁵ It would also consolidate their importance as a political tool and wartime stratagem in the socio-political system. Mary Douglas’s theory of “the unity of knowledge” and wild speculations aside, ultimately, the very obscure nature of dark shamanism necessitates that the evidence for these practices in the Late Ceramic Age Greater Antilles must remain tentative. We can, however, state with certainty that the dark side of shamanism was perceived as a social and political reality among the Kalinago.

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⁴ Even in contemporary Caribbean culture dark shamanism is alive and also connected to themes of mobility and exchange, since people looking to bewitch others will almost always go to another community or even a different island to enlist the services of a specialist in sorcery (Honychurch, personal communication 2009).

⁵ It has always been taken as a given that the *behique* would become less important when the *cacique* gained in importance and was also able to communicate with superhuman beings without the help of the *behique* (Roe 1998). I would propose here, following a comment by Peter Harris after the presentation of this paper at the 2009 23rd meeting of the IACA in Antigua, that the *behique* would remain an active and important political participant if he indeed was perceived as a dark shaman; a type of shamanism that was perhaps inaccessible to the *cacique*.

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