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**THE GIFT OF THE « FACE OF THE LIVING »:  
SHELL FACES AS SOCIAL VALUABLES  
IN THE CARIBBEAN LATE CERAMIC AGE**

Angus A. A. MOL \*

The peoples of the Caribbean Late Ceramic Age (AD 600/800-1492) were in contact through intensive and extensive exchange networks. This article takes a close look at the social mechanism behind one of these networks, which consists of face-depicting shell discs or cones. This is done from a gift-theoretical framework that focuses on aspects of alienability/inalienability of these shell faces in a specifically Caribbean setting. These artefacts are characterized from the indigenous concept of *guaizas* – « faces of the living » – as understood from ethnohistoric sources. After treating their iconography and giving an overview of their archaeological and socio-cultural contexts the discussion will focus on alienable and inalienable qualities of these artefacts. Finally, « shell faces as *guaizas* » will be used in an argument in which they figure as social valuables that are used to control extra-communal Others. [Key words: gift exchange, social valuables, inalienability, Taíno, Late Ceramic Age, Caribbean, *guaíza*.]

*Le don du « visage des vivants »: visages de coquillage comme objets à valeur sociale au Céramique tardif des Caraïbes.* Les peuples de l'âge Céramique tardif des Caraïbes (AD 600/800-1492) étaient en contact entre eux grâce à des réseaux d'échange intensifs et étendus. Cet article examine les mécanismes sociaux d'un de ces réseaux qui consiste en l'échange de disques ou cônes de coquillage, représentant des visages. Après une présentation de l'iconographie et des contextes archéologique et socioculturel, cette étude qui s'appuie sur la théorie du don se concentrera notamment sur les aspects d'aliénabilité/inaliénabilité de ces visages en coquillage. D'après des sources ethnohistoriques, ces objets peuvent être caractérisés selon le concept indigène de *guaíza*, « visage des vivants ». Ces objets à valeur sociale seront discutés et l'on démontrera comment ils permettent d'exercer un contrôle sur Autrui, conçu comme toute personne extérieure à une communauté. [Mots-clés: échange de dons, objets à valeur sociale, inaliénabilité, Taíno, Céramique tardif, Caraïbes, *guaíza*.]

*El regalo de las « caras de la vida »: caras de concha como bienes sociales del período Cerámico Tardío en el Caribe.* La gente del período Cerámico Tardío en el Caribe (AD 600/800-1492) se mantenía en contacto a través de redes intensivas y extensas

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de intercambio. Este artículo examina detenidamente el mecanismo social que se encontraba en el trasfondo de una de estas redes, relativa a unas representaciones faciales en discos o conos de concha. Nuestro trabajo parte de una base teórica sustentada en el concepto del dón y se concentra en los aspectos de alienabilidad/inalienabilidad de estas caritas de concha al interior de un contexto específicamente caribeño. Estos artefactos pueden ser caracterizados a partir del concepto indígena de *guaizas*, las « caras de la vida », que se deriva de las fuentes etnohistóricas. Después de analizar la iconografía y de dar una descripción de los contextos arqueológicos y socioculturales, la discusión se centrará en las cualidades alienables e inalienables de estos artefactos. Finalmente, utilizaremos las caritas de concha como *guaizas* en una argumentación que las considera como bienes sociales usados para ejercer control sobre los Otros ajenos a la comunidad. [Palabras claves: dones recíprocos, bienes sociales, inalienabilidad, taíno, período Cerámico Tardío, Caribe, *guaiza*.]

Recently, Pre-Columbian Caribbean studies concerning the exchange of raw materials (Knippenberg 2007; Hofman *et al.* 2008), crafted goods (Hofman *et al.* 2007), foodstuffs (Keegan 2007, chap. 3) and even ideas (Hofman and Bright 2008) have yielded new and exciting insights that stress the connectedness between peoples of the Pre-Columbian Caribbean through their extensive and intensive exchange networks. There has, however, been a lack of studies that concentrate on the social mechanisms of these exchanges. Yet, on a wider theoretical level, ever since Mauss (1925) wrote his seminal « *Essai sur le don* », shelves have been filled with studies on this subject. A considerable part of the discussion has revolved around the concept of inalienability as a central mechanism of gift giving. This discussion will be continued here and used to elucidate the social mechanisms behind exchanges in the Late Ceramic Age Caribbean.

#### INALIENABILITY AND ALIENABILITY

Most would agree that, although exchange is present in all aspects of society, not every aspect of society is open for exchange. There are some objects that should never be given away, i.e. objects that are inalienable. Examples of these are often famous works of art like the « *Mona Lisa* » in the Louvre, or Michelangelo's « *Pieta* » in the Vatican, but they can also be of a more personal nature, like a wedding ring. These sorts of objects are the main focus of the late Annette Weiner's monograph on inalienable possessions (Weiner 1992). In this book Weiner formulates her critique on Mauss (1925) by attacking an idea that was taken for granted, namely the profitable character of the reciprocal gift as the driving force behind exchange.

Weiner's most important gift to this discussion was the notion of a paradox contained within the exchange system: the paradox of keeping-while-giving

(*ibid.*, p. 6). Instead of focusing on exchange as the shaping mechanism of individual and communal identity, Weiner concentrated on those things that were kept out of the exchange structure. She postulated that those things are of a nature so inalienable that to exchange or otherwise lose them would be extremely detrimental to individual and communal identity. The paradox here lies in the fact that, because these inalienable possessions are the most potent force in the effort to subvert change, they represent the corpus of change at the same time. According to Weiner, this is due to the paradoxical function of the gift: to keep inalienable things out of exchange through the gift of some other object.

Weiner's focus on inalienability as the guiding mechanism of value creation through exchange has been critiqued as being too particular in its Melanesian origins and too focused on Melanesian gender roles in gift giving (Mosko 2000). Additionally, it seems unlikely that the nearly universal practice of gift exchange only functions as a diversion ploy in order to keep a specific set of objects inalienable. Yet, what is most interesting about Weiner's work on inalienability is that it points to a field of tension between inalienability and exchangeability, or rather alienability. This field marks the paradoxical effort to preserve and renew identity through what – I wish to propose – is one and the same medium: that of the social valuable.

Social valuables (Spielmann 2002) are often finely manufactured items that in some cases take months or even years to create. Nevertheless, they are valued even more than their production costs. These valuables can be material in nature, but also function on the level of what is nowadays termed « intellectual property », for instance knowledge of a certain ritual, a dance, how to cure a certain disease, etc. In addition to the cost of their production these items derive their value from a distinct uniqueness: a personal character. When a social valuable is exchanged it is not only the item that is exchanged, but also the narrative around it. This narrative can be constructed using various methods, for instance by acquiring items over long distances (Helms 1988), making an item with exceptionally exquisite craftsmanship (Helms 1993) or associating an item with the ancestors (Helms 1998).

Social valuables are closely correlated with the concept of the « gift » (Mauss 1925) and are best understood as the materialization of the « *personal relations* between people that the exchange of things in certain social contexts create » (Gregory 1982, p. 8, emphasis in original). As a rule, a social relation is hardly ever valued without social valuables being part of this relation. Additionally, social valuables constitute a mirror in which social relationships are, to paraphrase Foucault (1997, p. 180), « simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted ». So, the social connections materialized in social valuables are not strictly alienable or inalienable, nor altruistic, agonistic or antagonistic. An exchange system of social valuables entails a careful interplay of inclusion or

exclusion of certain social valuables from certain social exchanges at certain times to simultaneously represent, contest and invert a relationship.

This is also the focus of Godelier's *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999), which, without questioning its originality, can be seen as a synthesis of the Maussian « total social fact » of gift exchange and Weiner's concept of « inalienability ». On the one hand, he critiques and reformulates Mauss when acknowledging the obligation to reciprocate gifts, while at the same time wondering what the primary reason for giving is (*ibid.*, p. 95). On the other hand, Godelier also reconceptualizes Weiner's paradox of keeping-while-giving into the twofold paradox of keeping-for-giving and giving-for-keeping (Godelier 1999). These paradoxes greatly elucidate the structure of the exchange of social valuables. According to Godelier « sacra » – highly inalienable objects – have to be kept in order to imbue those things that are given with value, and things have to be given in order to imbue those « sacra » that are kept with value. It is a simple, but essential insight that, in order for an object to be valued in an exchange system, it has to have the perceived quality to be alienable at some moment. At the same time it is quite logical that, in order for an object to be valued, it needs to be actively and consciously manipulated to retain that value, i.e. be kept more or less inalienable.

Consequently, the danger in exchange that Lévi-Strauss (1970, p. 59) pointed out is not only a danger because one road leads to conflict, while the other leads to peace. It is dangerous, because one road leads to the antisociality of the Hobbesian warre (Corbey 2006), while the other leads to the exchange of everything by everyone. When objects are part of a social system, it is the quality to circumvent these dangers that makes them valuable. It is important to note that this quality finds its expression in culturally specific concepts and mechanisms.

In essence this comes down to the notion that the character of the social valuable follows specific tactics mediating the tension field between alienability and inalienability. The outcome of this is influenced by the careful manipulation of alienable and inalienable qualities by the donor. The gift-as-peacekeeping-device should be seen in this light (Corbey 2006; Sahlins 1972), though certainly not all gifts are meant to keep the peace. Exchanges can also be manipulated in such a manner that the gift of a social valuable is harmful, instead of beneficial, for the targeted social relations<sup>1</sup>.

Although especially the archipelagic setting of the area and the type of objects under study in this article will seem to be analogous to the Melanesian case-studies referred to above, I am not out to draw one-to-one homologies between Melanesia and the Caribbean here. What I will try to do is to present a case-study that employs Maussian gift theory, informed by the general concept of inalienability as discussed by Weiner and Godelier, in an archaeological and protohistorical setting. This will be done by looking at the exchange mechanisms that could have been responsible for the large distribution area of a conspicuous

array of face-depicting shell objects that have been found in the Caribbean as far north and west as Central Cuba and as far south and east as the tiny Île de Ronde in the Grenadines. The contexts of these shells can all be placed in the Late Ceramic Age (AD 600/800-1492) and have iconographic elements that in most cases resemble Chican Ostionoid iconography. The Chican Ostionoid series is connected with the Taíno cultural tradition (Figure 1). Although the use of the word Taíno and its association with specific cultural characteristics is commonplace in Caribbean archaeology it is not well known outside of Caribbean archaeology. In addition, the use of the term is not as unproblematic as it was once thought to be, which necessitates a short introduction of it.



FIG. 1 – Map of the Late Ceramic Age Caribbean indicating the spread of shell faces and the Chican Ostionoid heartland.

## CONTEXT OF THE CASE-STUDY

Caribbean archaeologists used to speak about « *the Taíno* » when referring to the seemingly coherent system of material culture that archaeologists recognized in the archaeological record pertaining to the Greater Antilles from Eastern Cuba to Puerto Rico from the Late Ceramic Age onward until the time of European contact. The Taíno people were even divided by Rouse (1992) in different subpeoples on the basis of specific material culture traits: Sub-Taíno in Cuba and Jamaica, Classical Taíno on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Eastern Taíno on Puerto Rico and, quite possibly, some of the northern Lesser Antilles (Hoogland and Hofman 1999). However,

since the beginning of this decade archaeologists have started to realize that the word « Taíno » is an invention of 19th century linguists and certainly cannot be used as a proxy for the auto-denomination of the heterogeneous groups inhabiting the Greater Antilles (Rafinesque 1836). Nevertheless, the general feeling among Caribbean archaeologists is that the term Taíno is too imbedded in the discipline to do away with. Suggestions for a re-conceptualization of the term are that it might refer to « Taíno material culture » or « Taínoness », relating to a consciously shared, but diffuse sense of communal identity (Petersen *et al.* 2004; Rodríguez Ramos 2007).

Linguistically, the indigenous societies that can be identified as Taíno belonged to the same Arawakan language family that is spread all over the northern part of the Southern American tropical lowlands (Granberry and Vescelius 2004). To many the so-called Classic component of Taíno material culture as identified by Rouse (1992) represents the epiphany of indigenous culture in the Caribbean. It is exemplified by ball courts, an extended set of highly intricate ceremonial paraphernalia, large villages, and, although subject to an ethnohistoric bias, the most clearly developed chiefdom structure (*ibid.*).

A sound understanding of the layout and workings of this socio-political system is of importance when considering the role of social valuables in this region and time period. Following mainstream thought the indigenous people of the Greater Antilles were regionally divided in large « complex chiefdoms » governed by quite rigid class distinctions. The regional polities were headed by a paramount *cacique* – the chief –, who had influence over a large amount of less powerful *caciques*<sup>2</sup>. According to some, this class of lower elites is called *nitainos* – « the good ones » –, but this is not a term that is used much nowadays. The class of the *naborias* – literally « the rest » – is considered to be the class of commoners (Keegan 1997).

Somewhere during the development towards these complex chiefdoms there was a transition from achieved to ascribed leadership strategies and, with that, a transition from non-hereditary to hereditary transference of political power (Curet 1996). Some have even suggested that this power structure was already so firmly in place by the beginning of the contact period that the more powerful *caciques* were even seen as semi-divine beings, who were treated with veneration and decorum (Keegan *et al.* 1998; Oliver 1997; Siegel 1997). To claim that the Greater Antillean *cacique* was indeed comparable to a « divine king » seems exaggerated, but the *cacique* did certainly have a special relation with the world of the superhuman beings and ancestors (Oliver 1997). They were the ones, with the help of *behiques* – « shamans » or ritual specialists –, who were able to communicate with these beings. This was done during the *cohoba* ritual in which they would purge themselves and inhale snuff drugs – of the powdered seeds of the *Anadenanthera sp.*, mixed with lime – through the nose or have them blown in

the nose by someone else to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Also, caciques were the leaders of communal events, such as distribution ceremonies and ritual dances, known as *areytos*.

It is evident from its material culture that the Antillean Late Ceramic Age worldview was animistic in nature. Furthermore, it has been put forward, through analogies with present-day indigenous South American mainland communities, that this socio-cosmic universe was divided into three layers: a watery underworld – the land of the dead –, the world as it would have been perceived normally, and the celestial spirit layer where the superhuman beings resided (Siegel 1997). These layers were perceived as meshed together, since certain beings could easily cross over layers. The spirits of the deceased, for example, who after their death went to a certain island, could also come back to roam around in the world of the living (Pané 1999 [1571], p. 17).

It has to be said that most of the suppositions, such as socio-political complexity and class roles, about the indigenous people of the Greater Antilles as a whole come from a fairly limited amount of ethnohistorical sources that often only relate to the island of Hispaniola. To make matters worse these sources can only seldom be corroborated by the now available archaeological evidence. A similar problem presents itself for Late Ceramic Age social valuables, which are seen as primitive valuables or prestige goods that functioned in local political networks, but using contextual information from other places. These findings are then extrapolated using a comparable theoretical perspective – very often the theory of socio-political evolution – and are then perceived to be indicators of socio-political complexity across the whole of the Antilles (Curet 1996). Unfortunately, the use and function of specific social valuables or social valuables in general has not yet been often researched from an overarching Caribbean perspective that focuses on both regional similarities and local specificities and it remains a challenge to do so <sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, following a toned-down version of Rodríguez Ramos (2007) and Oliver (2009) I would propose that the spread and diffuse similarity of the Taíno material culture tradition at least shows that the indigenous peoples of the Greater Antilles, and very possibly the northern Lesser Antilles, adhered to similar understandings of the cosmos, were politically organized in similar ways, and had similar views of sociality that allowed them to interact cross-regionally and on a frequent basis. This is, of course, evidenced by ceramic styles, such as the Chican and Meillacan Ostionoid, which are fairly standardized over large regions, although its perceived homogeneity is in part an artefact of stylistic research. It is, however, in the style and type of social valuables by which so-called « Taínoess » can be most clearly defined and in which this type of material culture finds its greatest distribution. This applies to a whole range of Taíno artefacts that share iconographic and metaphoric traits, such as *duho* seats, other types of woodwork, shamanic paraphernalia, trigonoliths, other lithic



ceremonial paraphernalia, and various shell ornaments, of which one specific type will be discussed below.

**SHELL FACES AS GUAÍZA**

Shell faces are shell discs or cones with an anthropomorphic or zoo-anthropomorphic face depicted on them with archaeological contexts of roughly AD 1000 until early contact times <sup>4</sup>. These artefacts have been called differently in many publications, but all these refer to the same type of artefact <sup>5</sup>. For the analysis of the distribution of these *guaízas* a database has been put together that categorizes form and iconography (Mol 2007) <sup>6</sup>. The *guaízas* have a length that ranges between the 3 and 13 centimetres and a width that ranges between 3 and 7 centimetres with the average *guaíza* being around 8 centimetres long and 4 wide. The majority (50) of the *guaízas* have a face that is modelled on the lip or part of the body of the queen conch (*Strombus gigas*. Figure 2). There are also a number of *guaízas* which are modelled on a milk conch (*Strombus costatus*. Figure 3) or similar species. In these cases the *guaíza* is not modelled only en face, but in a more three-dimensional manner, more reminiscent of the actual form of a human face.



1 cm 1 cm

FIG. 2 – *Guaíza* from Potrero de El Mango, located at Museo Indocubano Bani, Banes, Cuba (photograph by the author).



1 cm 1 cm

FIG. 3 – *Guaíza* from Sandy Hill (photograph courtesy of Menno L. P. Hoogland).

There are no ethnohistoric records that speak of actual shell faces, but there are some that speak of shell masks (Las Casas 1875, p. 477): « [Colón l]levó... *guaycas*, que eran unas carátulas hechas de pedrería de huesos de pescado, a manera puesto de aljófara [i.e. pearl...] con mucha cantidad y muestras de oro finísimo ».

These masks would correspond to the many little shell faces found on the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Thus *guayca*, or *guaíza*, is an indigenous denomination of an archaeologically recognizable artefact. *Guaíza* has also been translated by Granberry and Vescelius (2004) as « mask ». This would relate it to any type of artefact that was meant to cover the face and probably to wooden masks of which at least one survived until the beginning of the 20th century (Fewkes 1970). However, there is an interesting statement by Fray Ramon Pané who gathered information on indigenous groups of Hispaniola in his account that deals with the *goeíz*, which is in all probability an alternative spelling of *guaíza*:

When a person is alive, they call his spirit *goeíz*, and when he is dead, they call it *opía*. They say this *goeíz* appears to them often, in a man's shape as well as a woman's, and they say there have been men who have wanted to do battle with it, and when such a man would lay his hands on it, it would disappear, and the man would put his arms elsewhere into some trees, and he would end up hanging from those trees. (Pané 1999 [1571], p. 19)

Viewed in this manner the shell face *guaíza* is a specific Hispaniolan, or perhaps Greater Antillean, filling-in of a general South American worldview in which spirit and body are divisible, detachable and exchangeable (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Opposed to *opía*, this *guaíza* is said to be the spirit of a living human being, therefore linking it directly to « humanness ». However, as the excerpt shows, it is also more powerful than an ordinary human being, so *guaíza* is decidedly « superhuman » in nature too. This reveals the *guaíza* to be much more, or indeed something of a completely different category, than a mask.

If one takes a closer linguistic comparative look at the word *guaíza* it becomes apparent that this is built up out of different elements. In *guaíza* can be found the prefix *wa-*, which is the 1+2 person possessive (« ours » in the meaning of « yours and mine ») in Arawak (Brinton 1871). The remaining element *-íza* is connected to *ísiba*, which is used in a number of functions as « protruding element »; in this case to be translated as « countenance » (Oliver, personal communication 2007). This would be best translated as « our countenance », « our face ». In combination with the statement by Pané *guaíza* could be paraphrased as « face of the living » or « the way the spirits of the living look ».

#### **MATERIALS USED, APPEARANCE AND PLACE ON THE BODY**

Viewed as « face of the living » it is not necessary to connect the phenomenon of *guaíza* to a material and archaeologically traceable manifestations. Yet, the above statement on *guaycas* by Las Casas shows that, in addition to a superhuman phenomenon, *guaízas* are indeed also marked by a distinct physicality. This is reemphasized by one other excerpt from the works of Las Casas (1992,

chap. 59), in which he notes that: « [E]stas carátulas o figuras, llamadas guayças, la letra y luenga ». These valuable statements are supplementary. One describes *guaizas* as shell masks, while the other does not identify a material and adds figurines to the category of *guaiza*. It must be concluded from this that the phenomenon of *guaiza* must have had a material reflection as « masks » and figurines. In the case of the Late Ceramic Age Caribbean these are large categories of material culture, so the idea that artefacts can be depictions of « the spirit of the living » could be extended to faces and figurines of many different materials and possibly also other face-carrying artefacts from the Greater and Lesser Antilles (Figure 4).



FIG. 4 – Stone *cabeza* from the Museo del Hombre Dominicano, Santo Domingo, Republica Dominicana (photograph by the author).

The first excerpt from the works of Las Casas (1875, p. 477) tells of *guaizas* as having « much quantity and pieces of fine gold ». This corresponds closely to a number of other ethnohistoric descriptions of masks or mask-like objects, such as a *guaiza* that was presented to Colón by the *cacique* Guacanagarí on his second voyage (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 229) <sup>7</sup>. A similar present was made to Colón on his first voyage by the same *cacique* on 26th of December (*ibid.*, p. 129) <sup>8</sup>. There is evidently a link between gold and shell *guaizas* and this has been the subject of most of the work done on these artefacts (Alegría 1995; Oliver 2000). References to *guaizas* in the above and other ethnohistoric accounts have led to the belief that *guaizas* of pure gold must also have been produced and employed as costly signals for particularly powerful *caciques*. However, there are no material remains that suggest the existence of these – for now imaginative – artefacts. Nevertheless, the Spanish sources point to the fact that gold must have been an integral part of these artefacts. In the Colón Shipping List, running from 1495 to 1497, and a later list from 1506, only *guaizas* are described that are plated

with leaves of gold, have inlays of gold or might possibly have pieces of gold attached to them (Alegría 1980; Mira Cabalos 2000, pp. 48-141; Mol 2008).

In light of establishing the inalienable quality of the *guaíza* it is important to stress this link between this artefact and gold; not only because gold is among sedentary people almost universally a highly valued material, but also because in the Greater Antilles the use of gold takes a special place in origin narratives and other important socio-cultural concepts (Vega 1980). It appears that two types of « gold » were employed for inlays and artefacts: *caona* – pure gold – and *guanín* – an alloy of gold and bronze (Alegría 1995). Especially the use of *guanín* is important in an argument that would merit the *guaíza* as social valuable, since if not only pure gold, but also *guanín* was indeed used as inlay for *guaízas* and other artefacts – as has been suggested by various authors (Alegría 1995; Oliver 2000; Vega 1980) – this would mean that the *guaíza* can also be connected to long distance exchange (Helms 1988). Unlike the softer pure gold that could be subtracted and hammered in a cold state, the alloy *guanín* requires capabilities and knowledge of smelting. It is not known that these techniques existed on the Antilles before the advent of European contact. Therefore it is generally assumed that the closest source for *guanín* must have been either the Tairona region of Northern Colombia or the Central Andes, so this material could only have been acquired through long-distance exchange (Boomert 2000)<sup>9</sup>.

The perforations found on *guaízas* are important in an analysis of their function. The number of perforations that a single artefact carries ranges between zero and eight, with a mean of 3 to 4 perforations per artefact<sup>10</sup>. It is likely that one of the main functions of these perforations was to serve as holes for attaching threads or strings to the *guaíza*, so that it could be worn as an ornament. Yet, another function for the perforations might have been to attach other smaller ornaments, such as beads, small discs or feathers, to the *guaíza*. Often occurring perforations at, for example, the place of the ear could attest to this (Figure 5). Additional evidence for this can be found in a petroglyph from the Caguana ceremonial centre in Puerto Rico (Figure 6). According to Oliver (2000) the pendant that is the centrepiece of the string of beads around the head is a *guaíza*<sup>11</sup>. At both sides of the *guaíza* large discs are clearly visible. These discs symbolize accoutrements actually worn by real persons, such as the large ear discs, called *taguaguas* (*ibid.*). It seems that some of these decorations have been internalized in the carvings on some of the *guaízas*, such as clearly visible discs in the ears or a headband.

Additionally, the suggestion of a string of beads on the petroglyph from Caguana shows that the *guaíza* is most probably more than just a shell face; it is a carefully constructed signal consisting of a configuration of perishable and non-perishable material culture. Archaeologists only find the non-perishable material, the shell *guaíza* faces, which have been taken out of its configuration due to depositional processes or specific use in rituals. However as proposed by Oliver



FIG. 5 – *Guaíza* from Potrero de El Mango, located at Museo Indocubano Baní, Banes, Cuba (photograph by the author).



FIG. 6 – The Caguana cacique petroglyph (photograph courtesy of José Oliver).

(*ibid.*) it could have been that the interplay of white shell with materials of other colours made the *guaíza* an aesthetically highly valued artefact in the Late Ceramic Age<sup>12</sup>. It has to be noted that decorations that adorned the shell *guaíza* probably echoed the adornments of the person that was supposed to wear it, making this configuration an actual copy of the wearer.

The Caguana petroglyph is not only important to our understanding of *guaízas* for the reason given above. It also gives a direct representation of how a *guaíza* should be used: as a pendant. The perforations and the gully present on some of the artefacts point to exactly this way of wearing (Figure 7). Yet, there are also some alternatives to how the *guaíza* could have been worn. For instance, it is possible that the *guaíza* was worn on the forehead, such as mentioned by Colón when he speaks of the gift that was presented to him by the *cacique* Guacanagari (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 229). Worn in this way the *guaíza* probably did not cover the entire face – so it is not literally a mask – but it was placed on top of the forehead, possibly in a configuration that made up a headband.

Alternatively, *guaízas* were part of a configuration that made up a belt. These belts are mentioned in the Colón Shipping List and a famous example, dated to the contact period, survives to this day in the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde (Bercht *et al.* 1997, p. 159). The perforations around some of the *guaízas* (Figure 5) could indicate that the artefact was to be sewn on cotton or was part of multiple strings of beads. The position the *guaíza* has on the body when it is part of a belt is not a coincidence, given that it is then positioned near or even exactly on the navel. In general the navel is an element of the body that is often stressed



FIG. 7 – *Guaíza* from Potrero de El Mango, located at the Gabinete de Arqueología, Havana, Cuba (photograph by author).

in Taíno iconography, but more pointedly the navel was perceived as the mark that distinguished the living from the dead according to information by Pané (1999, p. 19). Consequently, the place of the *guaíza* on or near the navel in this way deftly harks back to what the *guaíza* actually is: a representation of the face of spirits of the living.

When one couples the *guaíza* as ornament to the idea of the *guaíza* as « face of the living », it already becomes clear that this is an artefact that is intimately connected to the wearer's personhood. Nevertheless, its prominent place on the chest, head or navel region indicates that it must have been important for signalling certain qualities to a larger audience at the same time. Clearly, the « face of the living » had an important material correlation that was meant to be seen.

### **GUAÍZA ICONOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLISM**

There are two facial features that stand out<sup>13</sup>. The first one is the prevalent pattern of *guaízas* with exceptionally large eyes (Figures 2, 3, 5 and 7). In fact, the eyes of these *guaízas* could have been even more pronounced if they were inlaid with gold, which was an often occurring practice in the Late Ceramic Age in general (Alegría 1995) and can further be postulated by the presence of pitted or depressed eye-sockets that are present on 21 of the *guaízas* (Figures 2, 3, 5 and 7). Another pronounced facial element of the *guaíza* is its mouth. A *guaíza* is often said to be characterized by the fact that its mouth is opened wide and that it displays a fierce looking set of gritted teeth (Allaire 1990; Arrom 1975). However, although it is true that most of the known *guaízas* have a wide opened mouth with

a row of gritted teeth, there are also some other variants that do not have this feature (Figure 3).

A headband or headdress has been identified on 42 of the *guaïzas*. The most pervasive is a design that looks wing-like or like folded bands coming together at the base of the forehead (Figure 8). A special subset of these is the same iconographic motif with a large jewel at the base of the forehead (Figure 9). The existence of this decoration is mentioned by Bernaldéz in his recounting of an encounter with a Jamaican *cacique* off the coast of Jamaica (Bernaldéz, cited by Oliver 2000).

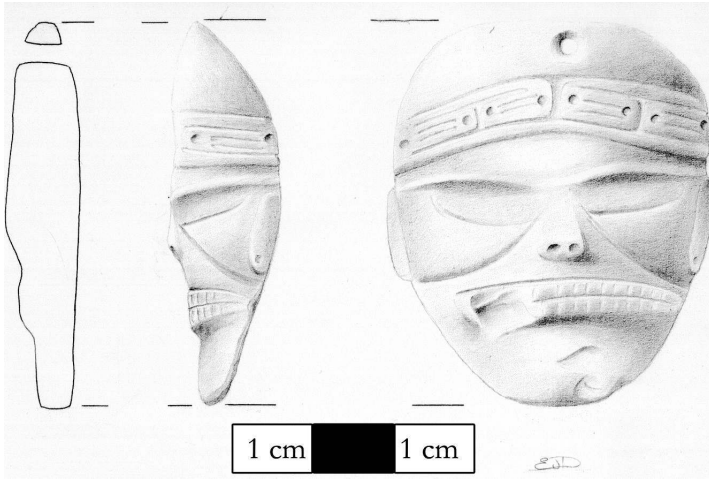


FIG. 8 – *Guaïza* from Morne Cybèle-1, La Désirade, Guadeloupe (drawing by Erik van Driel, courtesy of Menno L. P. Hoogland).



FIG. 9 – *Guaïza* with an unknown context, located at the Fundación García Arévalo, Santo Domingo, Republica Dominicana (photograph by the author).

Eighteen of the *guaízas* also have another interesting iconographic element that cannot be interpreted as personal adornments (Figure 10). This element in some cases consists of a single carved line or multiple carved lines running from the eyes to the lower cheeks, in the more elaborate examples they are actual bands rather than simple incisions. This specific element can be found on many more elaborately carved Taíno affiliated artefacts such as cohoba stands, wooden statues and carved stones, and also as part of petroglyphs. Arrom (1975) was the first to identify these patterns as « tears » running down the cheeks of these face depicting artefacts. Establishing the extent and importance of this iconographic element is a difficult task, since it is easy to misinterpret some of the articulated cheekbones, which are also carved on many of the faces, as these « tears ».



FIG. 10 – *Guaíza* with an unknown context, length approximately 7 cm, located at the Museo Indocubano Baní, Banes, Cuba (photograph by the author).

From its iconography it becomes clear that, although every *guaíza* is unique, the people who created them have drawn on a limited and shared set of ideas of what elements constitute a *guaíza*. There are, nevertheless, several regional differences in iconography and form, such as the prevalence of the tear-motif on Cuba, headbands on Hispaniola and internalization of personal ornaments and more conically shaped *guaízas* in the Lesser Antilles. Generally speaking, *guaízas* in the Greater Antilles seem to be less diverse in individual appearance than those from the Lesser Antilles. This suggests that what constitutes a shell *guaíza* in the Greater Antilles is more strictly delineated than in the Lesser Antilles. Additionally, *guaízas* in the Lesser Antilles have fewer perforations than those of the Greater Antilles and less evidence for the use of inlays. From this it



can be deduced that the shell *guaíza* in the Lesser Antilles would also have been valued as a standalone artefact instead of in a configuration of materials, such as would be the case in the Greater Antilles. Although there are regional differences, it has to be stressed that, on the whole, the form and iconography of all the individual *guaízas* evoke a sense of diffuse unity that one could interpret as being « Taíno ».

In addition, although absence or presence of certain motifs and forms may seem a trivial matter, the importance of this for an argument in which *guaízas* could feature as Taíno social valuables should not be underestimated. Iconographic motifs and their underlying semiotics are elements that partly construct the narrative of the artefact which would need to be recognized cross-regionally in order to be meaningful in exchange networks. Also, opposed to intangible aspects of artefacts – such as personal biographies – the appearance of the artefact remains a signal that continues to broadcast on a mnemonic level even when the direct social contact that led to the acquisition slipped from memory. In this sense, iconography and form of an artefact serve as an aide-memoire of the original idea, concept and narrative contained within the original exchange.

When looking at the *guaíza* face as a whole, this also has a conspicuous and telling appearance. The most pronounced parts of the face are the eyes and the mouth. The importance of eyes in Taíno material culture is evident, but scholarly work on their cultural metaphors is non-existent and will need further inquiry. Teeth however have been discussed more often. Arrom (1975) explains the prominence of the mouth full of gritted teeth as a sign of aggression. However, recently Samson and Waller (s. d.) have put forth the theory that the teeth are so exposed in order to show the benevolent nature of the depicted being. Whether aggressive or benign this motif should also be seen in the light of Late Ceramic Age worldview and shamanistic activities. Perhaps, it is so important because this is the body orifice that was used for vomiting in order to purge oneself previous to inhaling the snuff drugs. Another alternative explanation is that the teeth are clenched together because of a spasm of the face, caused by hallucinogens. I, however, would propose that the open mouth with the shining teeth is meant to give the *guaíza* a skull-like appearance. The reason for this interpretation is that, in many cases, more teeth are depicted than would normally be seen when viewing the bared teeth from the front. Therefore I suggest that this means that the bared teeth-motif is part of the representation of a defleshed face.

Indeed, when someone sees a *guaíza* for the first time it often is considered to be reminiscent of a skull and it is this emphasis on skeletal aspects that can be found in many artefacts of Taíno affiliation (Arrom 1975; Roe 1997). Especially the *guaízas* with bat noses are interesting in this regard since the bat is often connected to death (García Arévalo 1997). This seems like an antithesis when the *guaíza* is also seen as « the face of the living », but one must consider that the

strict dichotomy between life and death is a typically Western perception: in our perspective a lifeless body is also a soulless body. The division of life and death was not so clearly delineated among the Pre-Columbian indigenous groups of the Antilles. Actually, the dualism of life and death is a defining element for their cosmovision. Bones and skeletal features play an integral part in this: behiques starved themselves to ease the transgression between worlds (Garcia Arévalo 2001), bodies were kept in a state of decomposition for a long time or were reburied later (Hoogland and Hofman 1999), skulls were part of cotton figures (Siegel 1997) and, according to a narrative collected by Pané (1999, p. 13), all life in the sea was spawned by a gourd made fertile by bones.

The skull-like iconography of the *guaíza* can best be explained from this paradoxical dualism and not by connecting this artefact directly to death, since, as I will show below, the archaeological context points to a central position of the *guaíza* in communal life. What a *guaíza* could represent however is that the « face of the living » is already there, but normally present under a layer of flesh<sup>14</sup>. It is not until the liminal phase of decomposition sets in that the « real face of the living » is laid bare. What the iconography of some of the *guaízas* depicts is exactly this process of decomposition. The essence of the *guaíza* is thus liminal and dual in nature. Additionally it is not only the iconography, but also the material the *guaíza* is made of, such as the shell, which could have been reminiscent of bone. This argument is strengthened by the fact that gold or *guanín* inlays would have been present at exactly the liminal places of the face, namely the mouth and eyes.

The great variety of *guaízas* suggests that this is also a personalized artefact. This would make it likely that the *guaíza* is a depiction of the « face » of the person who owns the *guaíza*. This presents an interesting problem for an exchange situation, since this would make the artefact less likely to be alienated or be subject to desire. Wearing a *guaíza* depicting the « face » of another person is comparable to displaying a portrait of someone in your house who is not living there.

*Guaízas* have also been interpreted as a depiction of a repeated and specific set of superhuman entities (Stevens-Arroyo 2006), but I am sceptical of the inter-regional canonicity of this Taíno pantheon. Even if *guaízas* to my mind do not represent identifiable superhuman beings, similar concepts belonging to the type of depicted being could be contained in the *guaíza*. For example, it might well be that the dog-faced *guaíza* from Antigua contains similar qualities and would transpose these to its wearer as the qualities, such as a strong will or a certain knack for escaping dangerous situations, that trickster-like dog spirits are seen to have in Antillean cosmology (Pané 1999, p. 28).

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS OF THE *GUAÍZA*

The majority of known *guaízas* are part of museum collections and in most of these cases there is no knowledge of the archaeological region or site they were originally found. This has led to only eighteen of the known *guaízas* to be traceable to an archaeological context. Below I will discuss some of their site contexts.

#### ***Potrero de El Mango, Holguín province, Cuba***

Potrero de El Mango is one of the most important sites located in the rich archaeological region of the Maniabón Hills in the province of Holguín, Cuba. The site – extending over 400 by 50 metres – lies on a ridge that stretches out next to the Río Mulas (Rouse 1942, p. 66; Valcárcel Rojas 2002). The amount and variability of the ceramic, stone, bone and shell artefacts found at this site is truly astounding, leading Rouse (1942, p. 68) to state that: « With few exceptions, nothing of any importance can be found elsewhere in the Maniabón hills that cannot be duplicated here ». The occupation history of Potrero de El Mango is quite extensive with evidence of occupation from the 11th century until the 16th century<sup>15</sup>. The ceramics from this site and the region as a whole belong to the Meillacan Ostionoid subseries, but are clearly influenced by the Chican Ostionoid (Ulloa, personal communication 2007). Various other type of artefacts have been found at the site, such as a large coral head, a stone head, cylindrical stone beads, some heads of vomit spatulas made of manatee bone and several shell artefacts such as gouges, tips of the conch, colgantes, teeth inlays and, last but not least, five *guaízas* (Figures 2, 5 and 7).

Unfortunately, the *guaízas* were not encountered *in situ*, but have probably been excavated in the period between the discovery of the site in 1933 and Rouse's excavation in 1941. Interestingly enough, three of the *guaízas* from this site feature the tear-motif, but otherwise they are very dissimilar in both form and style. However, with five *guaízas* Potrero de El Mango is the only site to date from which more than one *guaíza* is reported. Its position, size and amount of elite social valuables has led local scholars to view the site as central in its regional network of interaction, with some even going as far as to speculate that this site might be the hub of a chiefdom that encompassed the complete Banes region (Castañeda 1941, as a reference in Valcárcel Rojas 2002).

#### ***El Cabo de San Rafael, Dominican Republic***

El Cabo is a 3,5 hectare habitation site located in a coastal valley on the Eastern tip of the Dominican Republic. Excavations have been taking place here

in the eighties under the auspices of the Museo del Hombre Dominicano and, recently, by a team from Leiden University (Hofman *et al.* 2006). The site itself is located on the coast, but it is part of an archaeological region that consists of multiple sites in the valley, in caves in the cliffs, and on the nearby ridge overlooking the valley (Johnson 2009; Samson 2010). The excavation and analysis of the site itself has presented a wealth of information on how a typical Greater Antillean settlement would have been spatially ordered and made contingent through time. In addition, several social valuables were found on this site in carefully controlled context, one of which is a *guaíza* (Figure 11). 52 Structures have been reconstructed in total out of which 31 houses have been identified using house plans as evidenced by postholes in the excavated part of the site by Samson (2010). She has also managed to combine several house structures that were erected at roughly the same spot at different points in time and group these into so-called House Trajectories – one single conceptual house that was rebuilt over and over again.



FIG. 11 – *Guaíza* from El Cabo, Dominican Republic, length approximately 4 cm (photograph courtesy of Menno L. P. Hoogland).

The *guaíza* has been found in close association with House Trajectory 2, two metres away from the largest micro-trigonolith found on the site. The beginning of this specific house-trajectory is traceable to the 11th century. It probably existed into the colonial period, because all the colonial material found onsite is also associated with this House Trajectory. This fact places the *guaíza* squarely in the last phase of the Late Ceramic Age and Samson (*ibid.*) even argues for an extended use-life of the *guaíza* in its use as an expression of indigenous identity into the colonial period. The *guaíza* itself is on the small side and features no perforations, so exactly how, or even if, this *guaíza* was incorporated in an ornament is difficult to establish. Nevertheless, the shell face sports all the other characteristics that are so defining for a *guaíza*; a single line at the top of the face,

large eyes, bared teeth and strong cheekbones, which are vaguely reminiscent of a tear-motif. At any rate, the specific find circumstances of this *guaíza* are evidence that this is indeed one of the central social valuables for the definition and continuation of communal identity.

### ***Sandy Hill, Anguilla***

Anguilla is a small and low limestone island at the east end of the Anegada passage, that divides the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Although the island is very dry, it offers rich marine resources due to its location on the Anguilla Bank, and various sources for lithic material. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, it is relatively densely populated island in the Late-Ceramic Age period with 14 substantial habitation sites (Crock and Petersen 2004, p. 139).

One of these sites is the coastal occupation site of Sandy Hill that spreads out for approximately 4 hectares on the slopes of the highest point of the island. It was during a salvage operation at the site that a *guaíza* was found in context with red slipped ceramics, two fragments of other « shell masks » – most probably *guaízas* of which no other documentation exists – and charcoal that was dated to AD 1070 +/- 90, making this the only securely dated *guaíza* (Figure 3). A second *guaíza* has been found on this island, in « slightly » less controlled circumstances, by a tourist at the Rendezvous-bay site in the south of the island (Crock 2000; Crock and Petersen 2004).

Other noteworthy artefacts from this site include a number of three-pointers made of stone – some of which were quite elaborate with zoomorphic designs – and coral. Additionally some stone beads, perforated *Oliva* shells and an eye inlay were found. In a similar fashion as Rouse did for the site of Potrero de El Mango, Crock (2000, p. 124) also stresses that: « it remains a fact that after years of surface collection across the island, no other site has produced similar objects ». In addition, Crock also makes a case for Anguilla as the hub of an inter-island chiefdom using the finds of *guaízas* as a line of evidence.

### ***Morne Cybèle 1 and Morne Souffleur, Désirade***

The islet of La Désirade is located in what is nowadays the Guadeloupe administration area and it is very likely that in Pre-Columbian times there also were close connections between La Désirade and its larger neighbour to the west. Information on the archaeological sites of this island has only recently become available with a small excavation at Morne Cybèle by Hofman and Hoogland (Hofman *et al.* 2007; Hofman 1995) and a micro-regional survey by De Waal (2006). Earlier finds were already picked up from the surface and it is in this manner that one *guaíza* was found (Bodu 1985, as a reference in De Waal 2006, p. 252). Another *guaíza* was recovered during an excavation by De Waal (*ibid.*, p. 310).

The *guaízas* are very different in form and iconography, but one of them shows clearly what one may call Chican-style iconography. De Waal (*ibid.*, p. 98) puts forward some theories on how the *guaízas* could have been deposited here: 1) loss, which according to her seems unlikely due to the special significance and labour investments related to the artefacts; 2) a situation in which the artefacts were hidden for some reason, but subsequently never collected; 3) a ritual offering of a *guaíza*; 4) the loss of special significance of the shell face over time. De Waal deems the last two reasons the most likely. I find the fourth option to be unlikely, since the antiquity of a social valuable in any normal situation would only add to its inalienability. For the rest of the alternatives it is not possible to establish whether one is more likely than the other. However it has to be said that the *guaízas* were not treated in any specific way, which is an argument in favour of ritual deposition.

In need of some attention here is another *guaíza* – with similarly punctated design as one of the *guaízas* – that is found at the site of Anse du Coq on Marie Galante, which is only some 37 kilometres away from Désirade. All things considered, the occurrence of two *guaízas* on such a small island – and three in such a small region – in the same timeframe at two different habitation sites makes one wonder. Could it be that here we have multiple communities competing through the acquisition of a *guaíza*? Are these *guaízas* traces of a far wider exchange network that featured multiple islands? Why are *guaízas* unknown from Guadeloupe to date, but occur on the smaller islands surrounding the island?

### *Lavoutte, St. Lucia*

The most southern *guaíza* for which an archaeological context could be established is found on the Lavoutte site on St. Lucia. The Lavoutte site is located at the north side of Cas-en-Bas bay and has been subjected to archaeological investigation by Bullen and Bullen (1968) and recently by a team from Leiden University (Hoogland and Hofman, personal communication 2008). It is located next to a natural stream and is encapsulated by difficult terrain and high ground on all sides. A trip by canoe was therefore the only easy access to this site in Pre-Columbian times.

This habitation site features some ceramics of which the majority belongs to the Suazan Troumassoid series and also some to the Troumassan Troumassoid subseries (Bullen and Bullen 1970). There are some interesting artefacts found at this site, such as a nearly complete ceramic figurine <sup>16</sup>, some more fragments of other figurines, shell celts, ceramic griddles, a stone amulet, a very interesting clay head, a manatee vomit spatula and an incised shell breast ornament (Mickleburgh, personal communication 2009). The clay head is very similar in all aspects to a shell *guaíza* with the exception that it is made of a different material

and has a hole at its base. Bullen and Bullen interpret it as a ceremonial loomweight, but it is more probable that it is actually a ceramic copy of a *guaíza* as Allaire (1990) has suggested.

Interestingly, this specific broken and burned *guaíza*<sup>17</sup>, which was picked up as a surface find before Bullen and Bullen investigated the site, that it was located far away from its Greater Antillean stylistic heartland in what was incorrectly believed to be for a long time the « territory » of the Island-Carib, who were supposedly in open conflict with the Greater Antilles (Rouse 1948a and b). This is a fact that is also noticed by Bullen and Bullen (1970) who comment that the presence of the *guaíza* « [does] not, of course, prove that Carib Indians living at Lavoutte raided Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands but [it is] the type of “trade” objects which might be expected to have been brought back as one result of such raids ». Notwithstanding the erroneous cultural interpretation that Bullen and Bullen had attributed to the site, it remains evident that this *guaíza* is an obvious argument for connections with the Greater Antilles ; whether it is the result of production onsite using Greater Antillean style characteristics, or of peaceful or violent direct relations, or of down-the-line exchange cannot be answered with the available data.

To synthesize this overview the *guaízas* that have an archaeological context have all been found, either as a surface find or *in situ*, on or near a habitation site that had an extended use-life and ranged from a medium to a large size. It is important to stress that in no case its final deposition was in a ritualized context, such as a cache or a burial, a fact which does not preclude the artefact to be marked as socially valuable in the Late Ceramic Age Caribbean shown by its conspicuous spatial distribution and specific ethnohistoric information.

Additionally, the dates of the contexts are also quite interesting. There are some early dates for sites in the Lesser Antilles in Anguilla (AD 1070 +/- 90. Crock 2000), but also some late dates for two sites on La Désirade where *guaízas* have been found, namely Morne Souffleur and Morne Cybèle-1 (AD1440-1480. De Waal 2006). This shows that the *guaíza* is neither late to arrive in the Lesser Antilles, nor early to leave. It is also important to highlight that the *guaízas* in the Lesser Antilles have almost always been found among ceramics and other artefacts that are local in style and that the archaeologists reporting the find of a *guaíza* have always stressed that it looks out of the ordinary, i.e. exotic. Still, the *guaíza* is often not the only artefact in these sites that is exotic in appearance; there are other elements in the assemblage that also indicate exchange of, for instance, raw materials (greenstone in Anguilla: Crock 2000) or other exotic artefacts (a hooded adorno in Lavoutte: Bullen and Bullen 1968) or « tradeware » – Boca Chica elements in Potrero de El Mango (Valcarcel Rojas 1999) and Suazan Troumassoid ceramics in Morne Souffleur and Morne Cybèle-1 (De Waal 2006). This would suggest that it is not by accident that we find an exotic looking artefact at these sites, but that the acquisition of exotic materials or styles must have

occurred at least more than once. Actually, the dispersion of *guaízas*, along with other social valuables, in the Lesser Antilles is seen as emblematic for interactions between the Greater Antilles and the mainland (Hofman *et al.* 2007). At any rate, when the *guaíza* is viewed as a social valuable that was exotic for the Lesser Antilles, this explains why there is relatively little « drift » in *guaíza* form and iconography over such an extended region.

Although worded in rather vague terms, it has to be mentioned that *guaízas* are found at sites that are deemed « special » in some way or another by almost all reporters. In the case of Potrero de El Mango and the sites on Anguilla this special character is explained as an elevated socio-political status in site or island hierarchies (Crock 2000; Valcarcél Rojas 1999). In other cases this is phrased in more obscure terminology, such as « ceremonial centre » – Lavoutte in St. Lucia – (Bullen and Bullen 1968), or « special character » as with Morne Souffleur and Morne Cybèle 1 (De Waal 2006). It has to be recognized that the find of a *guaíza* on or near a site also adds to the « specialness » of that site according to many of the reporters, of course. The relative rarity of *guaízas* combined with their prevalence in relatively large settlement sites, however, seems to be an argument in favour of viewing the *guaíza* as a social valuable that is to be correlated with elevated community status and perhaps also with the personal prestige of certain individuals living in these communities that used *guaízas* as personal adornments.

#### DISCUSSION: THE *GUAÍZA* AS SOCIAL VALUABLE

The key to understanding the meaning of the *guaíza* is to see it as a depiction of the « way the spirit of the living looks ». In this way, both answers – as depiction of the own « face » and as a depiction of a superhuman being – to what a *guaíza* represents can be equally true, even more so when coupled with the pronounced dual and liminal character of the *guaíza* <sup>18</sup>. Remember that caciques were seen as « semi-divine » – a better word might be « semi-superhuman » – persons (Keegan *et al.* 1998; Oliver 1997; Siegel 1997). In this way, the *guaíza* could have been the depiction of the superhuman « face » of the *cacique*. It might be that this superhuman world that the « face » of the *cacique* reminded of was the world of the ancestors, which would further explain the *guaízas* skeletal features. This would lead to an argument in which the *guaíza* should be seen as a personal artefact that depicts the ancestral face of a lineage, with which the keeper of that lineage, the wearer of the *guaíza*, is connected on a personal level. In this way, the *guaíza* symbolized to every one who looked upon its wearer that he or she had the ability to interact with these ancestral and superhuman forces, which must have been an important socio-political signal. It fits within our understanding of the Pre-Columbian indigenous cosmivision to propose that the



*guaíza* could not only have been symbolic for the intermediation between the wearer and the superhuman world, but also have been actually used as a tool to directly intermediate with or help to intermediate with this superhuman world. In the first case, these artefacts would have been part of a cache – but none has been found in such a context so far –, while, in the second one, they would appear in « normal » archaeological contexts of use.

Interaction and mediation as key symbolisms for the *guaíza* typify it as an ornament that would have signalled its wearer to be a highly adept social actor. In accordance with this, the *guaíza* should be first and foremost seen as a social tool that could have been worn on a day to day basis or reserved for special occasions, but not by everyone. *Guaízas* were perhaps not rare, but certainly exclusive artefacts, since not everybody would have been able to craft or commission one<sup>19</sup>. In social life the symbolism of the *guaíza* would have reaffirmed the status of its wearer. This leads the *guaíza* to be almost automatically connected to political power. This is backed up by the historical sources (Las Casas 1992, chap. 59) and the petroglyph in Cagunua, which depicts a prototypical *cacique* (Oliver 2000). It is also in line with some archaeological and anthropological discussions of political hierarchy that think about ornaments as aide-memoires of who holds power (Curet 1996; Earle 1997).

So, it can be argued that the *guaíza* was a liminal aide-memoire of a specific individual's personhood and social capabilities that could additionally have been used as mediatory device. Yet, there is another side to the social value of a *guaíza*: what sort of signal would have been sent when *guaízas* were presented in exchange? Although it cannot be established through archaeometric techniques that specific *guaízas* were indeed exotic – i. e. coming from another island –, the ethnohistoric record, their stylistic characteristics and their archaeological context make a strong case for a scenario in which they were a favourite item for exchanges. So, phrased in the terminology of the theoretical framework discussed at the beginning of this article: if a *guaíza* is an alienable valuable, then for what sort of situation would it have been suitable to be presented as gift? In order to say anything definite on this subject, the reasons for keeping, giving and acquiring have to be framed in terms of alienable and inalienable elements of this specific artefact class.

Arguments in favour of *guaízas* rather being kept than exchanged are the least difficult to establish, since they are explicit messages already contained in the concept of *guaíza*. The *guaíza* is probably the « face of the living person » who carries the artefact. Identity or personhood is the central notion of the *guaíza*. It is thus important as a depiction of a lineage and individual's identity, but at the same time the identity of the lineage and person is also influenced by the *guaíza*. The ability to hold on to a certain identity and the status coming with this identity is one of the reasons why a *guaíza* would rather be kept than given. Even looking over the lifespan of an individual, this notion can be extended to inalienability on

communal level (Weiner 1992, p. 140). Indeed, it has to be acknowledged that individual ownership is a very Western notion : from a viewpoint of the Caribbean Late Ceramic Age, it could be more probable that a *guaíza* would have been communally kept than individually owned. The fact that all *guaízas* have been found near habitation sites and not in caches or burial sites is an argument in favour of this. Moreover, having an ornament that clearly signals a strong and recognizable identity of one of the members of the community is beneficial for the community, especially when this person is also the one who is responsible for extra-communal contacts.

Extra-communal contacts in this sense do not only entail other human communities, but could also represent contact with superhuman extra-communal forces. This is another quality that would have led the *guaíza* to be rather held inalienable. It has been postulated that other Late Ceramic Age social valuables were also used as media for communicating with, and thereby exerting some amount of control over, otherwise intangible actors of the social system (Oliver 1997). To give away such an artefact signifies giving away this control over these superhuman beings. The skeletal features of many of the *guaízas* can be linked to the power to mediate with ancestors and the superhuman realm they inhabit (Helms 1998). So, giving away a *guaíza* that can be linked to a superhuman entity and the qualities it possesses is to sacrifice these qualities in exchange.

There is also the aspect of raw political power that comes with this artefact, since, according to early historic sources, it was only worn by elites. Additionally, its symbolism and the nature of the sites at which *guaízas* are found suggest that we are not dealing with an artefact that is just one of many. If the *guaíza* was indeed an elite artefact, it could be considered to be even more inalienable, since it would also have been part of an elite system of interaction and recognition. A *guaíza* could not only have functioned as a mediatory device for social purposes, but also as a mediatory device for entering into this circle of elites. Relinquishing control of a *guaíza* through exchange would also mean losing one way of signalling that the wearer and his community were elite.

The cost of acquiring a *guaíza* means that it probably was not easily relinquished through exchange. First of all, there is the cost of crafting the *guaíza*, which must have been quite high – especially when one takes into account that the *guaíza* must have been part of a configuration with other costly materials, like beads, specifically coloured feathers, cotton and also gold ornaments and inlays (Helms 1993). The fact that it is likely that some of this material had to be acquired through exchanges makes it an even costlier artefact. Additionally, if *guanín* was indeed part of this configuration, the costs must have been enormous and would have given extra status to the *guaíza* since it also alluded to the powers to harness the exotic (Helms 1988). Last, but not least, it has to be considered that every *guaíza* is unique in form, but also in the narrative that is an integral part of the artefact. Consequently, when a specific *guaíza* was lost in exchange it was

irreplaceable. So, it is safe to conclude that a *guaíza* must have been costly and highly inalienable, but why offer it in exchange if it constitutes such an inalienable part of individual and community identity? In other words: what are the qualities of a *guaíza* that led it to be alienated? First of all, while losing a *guaíza* in exchange must always have meant a loss to individual and communal identity, giving it away held some real benefits. There might have been the expectation of a profitable return gift. Moreover, the creation of new social relations or the strengthening of older alliances through the exchange of a *guaíza* could have been of a greater social value than trying to hold on to it perpetually (Weiner 1992). To investigate this notion further, one must turn to the ethnohistoric sources<sup>20</sup>. First of all, it is known from ethnohistoric sources that the *guaíza* was actually quite frequently alienated. The Colón Shipping List describes 45 *guaízas* and 6 belts with faces – of which one contains two *guaízas* – making it, next to hammocks and skirts, the most frequently listed object (Mol 2008). Moreover, it is remarkable that on the later shipping list, one of the few objects that are named are three *guaízas* (Mira Caballos 2000, pp. 99-100). This shows that the giving of *guaízas* continued for a long time and that this item remained known under its indigenous name by the Spaniards. Overall, *guaízas* must have been relatively abundant in the Late Ceramic Age. A description, taken from the diary of Colón, of « *muchas cabezas en manera de caratona muy bien labradas* » – found together with many statuettes in a hut near to the coast on Cuba – hints at this (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 50).

From the diary of the first voyage of Colón there is one quite detailed description by Colón of him receiving a *guaíza* on the 26th of December, the day after his ship, the Santa María, was shipwrecked (*ibid.*, p. 129)<sup>21</sup>. Colón was given this specific *guaíza* by the earlier mentioned *cacique* Guacanagarí, with whom Colón developed an alliance that was to be unequalled by any of the other alliances between the indigenous Antilleans and the Spaniards (Wilson 1990, p. 71). It is thought that Guacanagarí was a *cacique* of medium rank. He was under the control of the paramount *cacique* Caonabo (Wilson 1990). It is not unlikely that Guacanagarí was carving out a future for himself when he solicited the help of Colón through his gifts, of which the *guaíza* was one of the most significant (*ibid.*, p. 75). On the second voyage, Guacanagarí sent Colón two other *guaízas* as gifts showing his dedication to their social bond (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 229).

The diary of the first voyage of Colón holds another critical reference from which it can be deduced why a *guaíza* was given, for which the context is as important as the exchange described. The exchange takes place on the 14th of January. This is after Colón has founded the first Spanish settlement in the Americas, La Navidad. He leaves a group of men there together with trade goods and he embarks on the Niña. On the 13th of January, when he is anchored in a bay somewhere on the Samaná peninsula, they meet a group of people who are

markedly different from the people they met before and who spoke another language or dialect than the people they had so far interacted with on Hispaniola.

Colón takes the same approach as he had done before by entering into exchange with these people, who were carrying bows and had faces blackened by ash. He ordered his men to go ashore and exchange trade goods for the bows they were carrying<sup>22</sup>. According to Colón, they had exchanged two bows when the Spaniards were suddenly attacked and pursued by these people. The Spaniard drove their attackers off and remained on guard the entire night, because they feared that these people were cannibals who wanted to eat them. At dawn, the situation was totally different. A throng of people had gathered on the beach and made gestures that they were peaceful in nature. Colón allowed their leader to visit him on his ship where they shared food and where the unnamed cacique also gave him a *guaíza* (*ibid.*, p. 154)<sup>23</sup>. This seems like a schoolbook example of the peace-bringing gift (Corbey 2006; Sahlins 1972), so it is possible that *guaízas* were employed strictly in a manner that promoted unity among otherwise non-related communities. Still, this event could also be interpreted in another, more antagonistic, argument.

#### CONCLUSION: GUAÍZAS AS TOOLS OF CONTROL

By exchanging an object one is not only exchanging the physical object, but also creating something more that connects the two exchange partners (Gregory 1982). To exchange with someone is to bind him or her in a social relationship. It is impossible to precisely reconstruct relationships of this kind by using the still rather sparse archaeological record and the not unproblematic ethnohistorical sources of the Antilles. The information that is available for reconstructing of the web of social relations that could have been brought about by the exchange of *guaízas* points to the artefacts being used in such a manner. It suggests that the *guaíza* is filled with the identity of the individual and community that owns the *guaíza*. In this manner the *guaíza* will be sacrificed by the donor in order to alienate something much more important from the receiver. In this case, exchanging the *guaíza* is gaining control in order to pacify, rather than pleasing in order to pacify. I acknowledge that the distinction between « control and pacify » and « please and pacify » is rather blurred, since the effects are often similar. Indeed, on the contrary to what has been suggested in other publications on gift giving (*e.g.* Vandeveldt 2000), I would argue that a gift never really belongs to either an agonistic or an antagonistic category. The point is that by sacrificing something to give others what they want, one can see to one's own need in an indirect, but more effective manner. A strategy that follows this will, as a rule, always tactically combine stratagems of appeasement and provocation. In this case, the exchange of *guaízas* can also be characterized in this manner: as

sacrificing control over an object and its powers to gain control over an extra-communal Other.

If a *guaíza* was filled with inalienable qualities of communal and individual personhood, and if this was how the exchange of a *guaíza* was utilized, why was the *guaíza* so sought after as a social valuable? Wearing a *guaíza* that was filled with the personhood of someone else is a bit like hanging the portrait of an unfamiliar person in one's own living room. Thus, more bluntly put, why was it acquired through exchange at all? Next to the fact that it was an ideal social valuable to possess and a feat of its own to enter into a *guaíza*-exchange, there is something else to the exchange and ownership of a *guaíza*. It is a marker of the identity of another individual or community that was still part of the *guaíza* after it had been alienated from the individual and his community, because it would have been part of the narrative that would still be an important part of the object. Still, this does not mean that the *guaíza* could have taken on only one identity. I would postulate that a *guaíza* would be filled with identity anew each time it would have been acquired by a different individual and his or her community, while still containing all its past identities. A *guaíza* would have been an enhancement to personal or communal identity, because it had such a narrative contained in the object, while at the same time it would have been an achievement to show that one's own identity was able to control all the previous identities. To be part of the sequence of such previous identities and narratives enhanced the power and the prestige that the new owner gained when acquiring the object.

A *guaíza* could be a sort of ranking device. It contains the histories of all the individuals that have kept it before you, but at the same time it is part of your own identity. The more applicable analogy is that of the Surinamese Waiwai and their exchange of Western goods to the wild « unseen tribes ». The Waiwai are able to control the trade objects of the Western community that they perceive as dangerous exotics by infusing the objects with their own social identity by exchanging them with and in order to control, i.e. pacify, the « unseen tribes ». Through these dangerous exchanges they expand their own social sphere (Vaughn Howard 2001). Similarly, a *guaíza* was costly to exchange and control, but not too costly, since the signal sent by its acquirement and possession would have outweighed the costs. The ability to control extra-communal Others, a quality that is difficult to show to others without entering into open conflict, was signalled by the exchange of a *guaíza*.

Ironically, it remains ever difficult to retrace the maussian obligation to give, receive and reciprocate in the archaeological record and this is also true for the *guaíza* (Mauss 1925). Yet alienable and inalienable features of the *guaíza* can be identified. These show that the *guaíza* was a powerful social tool for mediation with extra-communal forces. This was also how it was used in exchange: to control the social system through the distribution of *guaízas*. So, although a *guaíza* would also have had a distinct use outside an exchange cycle and it was

therefore tempting to hold onto a *guaíza*, these qualities also constitute a clear signal when exchanged. Additionally when seen in a functional way the exchange of such a social valuable would be such that it would have enabled a myriad of other exchanges and occasions of social bonding. In this way, the *guaíza* was the ideal social medium that helped to keep the social system flowing. \*

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## NOTES

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1. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a now outmoded notion that the gift of a knife to a friend is a sign that the bond of friendship is considered to be broken. In Guyanese and Venezuelan indigenous communities *kanaima*, ritual shamanic killers, give certain objects and poisoned food to their intended targets (Whitehead 2002). Also it should be remembered that the Germanic *gift* means either « poison » or « present » (Benveniste 1997).

2. Note that *cacique* was most probably the title for the head of an extended family (Oliver, personal communication 2007). Even nowadays the term *cacique* is used in the Dominican Republic and is used for petty bosses who behave in a despotic way.

3. Notable exceptions are the works of Boomert (1987) and Oliver (2000).

4. There is one notable exception, namely a shell face from the Indian Creek site in Antigua that has a context dated to AD 900-1100 (Rouse and Faber Morse 1999), but due to its appearance and context it remains unclear whether this is a shell face that is connected to the other shell faces.

5. *Guaízas* have been variously named « amulet » (Bercht *et al.* 1997), « face » (Douglas 1992), « mask/carátula/caratona » (Rouse and Faber Morse 1999), « head/cabeza » (Bullen and Bullen 1968) and « *guaíza* » (Allaire 1990).

6. The information found in the database of *guaízas* has been collected by literature research and by visiting museum and private collections in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. This has led to a catalogue that at the moment of writing numbers 62 individual artefacts. This is a very partial list, since it is expected that many shell faces can be found in unpublished private collections.

7. « *Era uno dellos primo del Guacamari [a Taíno cacique], el cual los habia enviado otra vez. Despues que se habian tornado aquella tarde traian carátulas de oro, que Guacamari enviaba en presente* ».

8. « *Trajeron al Almirante una gran carátula, que tenia grandes pedazos de oro en las orejas y en los ojos en otras partes* ».

9. In the invaluable Colón Shipping List there are also two other materials named out of which a *guaíza* could be manufactured. The list points to « *una carátula de algodón con nueve hojas de oro* » and also to « *catorce guaycas labradas de algodón e piedra, las tres con siete hojuelas de oro* ». Apparently *guaízas* manufactured from cotton and stone also existed. Unfortunately, cotton examples belong to the realm of perishable materials that remains closed for archaeologists. Stone *guaízas* might still be in

existence and could actually already have been found, but not recognized as such, like stone amulets or discs with heads depicted on them or the famous stone *cabezas* (Fewkes 1970, Figure 4).

10. The range of the number of perforations for *guaizas* that have been depicted en face is larger – between zero and eight – than for those that have been depicted on a conically formed shell – between one and four –, but the average number of perforations of en face *guaizas* is 3.5, so there is not much difference between the two.

11. Las Casas (1992, chap. 59) also speaks of a *guaiza* being taken out of its configuration as the centrepiece of a necklace with stone beads before it is presented to Colón.

12. In this respect it is interesting to note the fact that the white of the shell of the *Strombus Gigas* is not its original colour. When it is caught and killed the part of the shell of the *Strombus* that is used for crafting has a pink hue. It is only after some time that, under the influence of sunlight, the pink colour fades and the shell becomes white. So, although archaeologists only find white shell faces, it could be that they originally were pinkish instead of white. Additionally, it could be that the colour of the artefact was something that could have been used by the indigenous people of the Late Ceramic Age to establish its antiquity.

13. This discussion is focused on the socio-cultural connotations of the *guaiza* in the Greater Antilles, while a large part of its distribution area, the Lesser Antilles, is completely left out of the discussion. This is mainly due to the fact that the ethnohistoric data for the Lesser Antilles is much sparser than for the Greater Antilles. Hence, we know much less of the Late Ceramic Age social, political and cultural system of the Lesser Antilles than we do of that of Hispaniola. Although it has to be said that much valuable archaeological work has been done in the past decade to make this situation more balanced (Delpuech and Hofman 2004). The most that can be said for now is that there seems to be no difference in the archaeological patterns and some small, but certainly no major differences in the iconographical patterns. Furthermore, it can be postulated that the exchange of *guaizas* would fit within a network strategy of power consolidation (Blanton *et al.* 1996) that has already been postulated for these societies (Siegel 2004).

14. The fact that the *guaizas* are not either very masculine or feminine looking, might mean that gender is not important for this depiction of the « face of the living ».

15. Only one <sup>14</sup>C date is available (AD 1070 Cal. +/-70), but Spanish ceramics and cow bones are also found on this site (Valcarcel Rojas 1999).

16. Interestingly this figurine, and another head appliqué, sport two deeply incised lines running from the eyes down the cheeks. Bullen and Bullen (1969, p. 70) interpreted these as representing paint or tattoos, but could it also be that this is a southern variant of the tear-motif so prevalent on Cuba? This would be an interesting alternative that would further blur the line between Lesser and Greater Antillean iconography.

17. When the artefact was visually inspected once more during the summer of 2009 by Menno Hoogland of the Leiden University excavation team, he called into questions that the *guaiza* was actually made out of shell. The artefact is undoubtedly recognizable as a *guaiza*, but it could be that this is a bone or wooden variant. Further research will be done to establish the material (Hoogland, personal communication 2009).

18. In an alternative, non-Western, frame of mind one might even go as far to postulate that *guaizas* – and indeed a whole range of Caribbean artifacts – are not only depictions of the « face of the living » and superhuman beings, but that they actually are the face of the living and superhuman beings.

19. For a short discussion of the costs involved in crafting Late Ceramic Age social valuables, see Mol (2007, chap. 5).

20. One can of course not uncritically copy the meaning of and motivation for exchanges that occur at the flashpoint of the meeting of two different exchange systems (Thomas 1991). For an in-depth discussion of exchange in the early years of the Taíno and Spanish interaction, see Mol (2008).

21. « Trajeron al Almirante una gran carátula que tenía grandes pedazos de oro en las orejas y en los ojos y en otras partes, la cual le dio con otras joyas de oro que el mismo rey había puesto al Almirante en la cabeza y al pescuezo; y a otros cristianos que con él estaban dio también muchas. El Almirante recibió

*mucho placer y consolación de estas cosas que veía, y se le templó la angustia y pena que había recibido y tenía de la pérdida de la nao, y conoció que Nuestro Señor había hecho encallar allí la nao porque hiciese allí asiento » (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 129).*

22. It could be reasoned that this group of bow carrying men with their faces covered with ash were actually on their way to another village with hostile intentions.

23. « *Este rey, con tres de los suyos, entraron en la barca y vinieron a la carabela. Mandóles el Almirante dar de comer bizcocho y miel y dióle un bonete colorado y cuentas y un pedazo de paño colorado, y a otros también pedazos de paño, el cual dijo que traería mañana una carátula de oro, afirmando que allí había mucho, y en Carib y Matinino. Después los envió a tierra bien contentos » (Fernández de Navarete 1922, p. 154).*

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