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Title of Thesis:
A Critical Exploration of the Lives of Taíno women in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean within the Framework of Gender Archaeology.

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Acknowledgements.

I thank God for allowing me this opportunity. I also thank my supervisor, Professor Basil Reid for his guidance in completing this project. I also say thank you to my family and friends for their support and encouragement.
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Abstract.

This study explores the daily lives and experiences of women in Taíno society, in order to provide an understanding of what their roles were before European contact, and explore how contact would have influenced changes in their lives. The study is written from a feminist archaeological perspective, within the framework of gender archaeology, and thus contains a discussion on gender archaeology, as well as feminist archaeology, and how it relates to this study.

Glossary.

This section lists some of the key terms used in this essay. These include, but are not limited to: Taíno, Gender Archaeology, Feminist Archaeology, Greater Antilles, Pre-Contact period, Contact period, Prehistoric, Androcentric, Euro-indigenous, areytos, conuco, cacicazgos, cacique, yucayeques, bateys, duhos, Cemis, chiefdoms, cohoba, encomederos/encomienda, repartimiento.
INTRODUCTION.

Rationale.

The Taíno people lived in the Caribbean region during the period preceding the arrival of Christopher Columbus. In this study, the social position of women in Taíno society is examined, within a framework of gender and feminist archaeology, in an attempt, to better understand the daily lives and experiences of these women, and how this changed with the arrival of the Europeans. This study is necessary, as women in indigenous societies have not been given adequate attention in academic writing. However, women in Taíno society were highly valued and played integral roles in the functioning and management of the society, even though they were generally subordinate to men. An adequate amount of research has not been devoted to the lives of these women, especially from a gendered or feminist archaeological perspective. There is a gap in the historiography and literature pertaining to Taíno society, which this paper will fill, as it takes a gendered, feminist archaeological approach.

Thesis Statement.

This essay will explore the social, political and religious roles of women in Taíno societies, gaining an understanding of their daily lives and experiences, through a framework of gender archaeology as it pertains to the Caribbean region and writing within a feminist archaeological perspective, proving that Taíno women’s lives were altered in significant ways as a result of the arrival of the Europeans.

Objectives.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To explore the social position of women in Taíno societies.
2. To examine the extent of their political influence.

3. To explore the position of Taíno women in a religious context.

4. To investigate the way in which Taíno women’s lives were altered as a result of European contact, and the nature of evidence which indicates contact between Taíno women and Europeans.

5. To analyse the implications for gender and feminist archaeology as it relates to women in Taíno societies.

**Methodology.**

In conducting this study, both primary and secondary sources were consulted. These sources provided both quantitative and qualitative data. In terms of qualitative sources, numerous sources pertaining to Caribbean archaeology, the Pre-Columbian Caribbean, Taíno society, the archaeology of women, women in the archaeological record, gender archaeology, as well as feminist archaeology were consulted and analysed. In the course of this research, quantitative sources of data were encountered, providing statistics pertaining to the population of Taíno society, as well as data on trade in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean, which was analysed, to gain a better understanding of the role of women in these societies.

**Parameters.**

In this study, the role of women in Pre-Columbian societies located in the Greater Antilles has been investigated. The original intention was to investigate the role of women in Pre-Columbian societies as it evolved with the coming of the Europeans throughout the Caribbean. However, research is limited in this area. I have focused my research on the Taíno, whose societies were located mainly in the Greater Antilles. These people were present when the Europeans arrived in 1492. I examine the roles of all Taíno women present
in the society, irrespective of class distinction, from the pre-contact period, leading into the contact period.

**Background of study.**

This section contains a discussion pertaining to Taíno society and way of life. It contains details about the geographical location of Taíno societies, Taíno ancestry, various levels of Taíno social evolution, Taíno population statistics, Taíno village layout and agricultural and other food getting practices, as well as Taíno cultural life, and Taíno social organization and political life.

The Taíno were one of the three major cultural groups located in the Caribbean region, upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492; the other two groups were the Island-Caribs and the Guanahatabey.¹ The Taíno, collectively, inhabited the islands of the Greater Antilles. Cultural plurality existed among the Taíno, and three major distinctions were made; Classic, Western, and Eastern Taíno. The Classic Taíno, were culturally superior to the Western and Eastern Taíno, and were located in what is today Puerto Rico and Hispaniola.

Evidence of the cultural superiority of the Classic Taíno comes from their highly developed socio-political organization, indicated by the presence of ball-courts, stone-lined plazas, and the practice of agriculture, evident due to the presence of conucos.² The culture referred to as Western Taíno, was located in what is today Jamaica and Central Cuba,³ and the Eastern Taíno inhabited the islands of the northern most Lesser Antilles and the Virgin Islands.⁴

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Taíno population was large, evidenced in conuco cultivation, and the presence of chiefdoms, referred to as cacicazgos. Villages were ruled by the village chief, and organized into regions, and each region was ruled by the dominant cacique. This hierarchical form of social organization is indicative of a highly organized, developing society, with each member of the society having a particular role. At the time of conquest, Hispaniola consisted of 5 major cacicazgos. Villages were referred to as yucayeques and ranged in size from small groups of houses of less than 10, occupied mainly by nuclear families, to large villages consisting of hundreds of houses, inhabited by extended families. At the time of contact, there were 100 polities, with a combined population of hundreds of thousands of people. In order to sustain such large populations, an effective system of government had to be in place. The Taíno elite were innovative and had great foresight in dominating power within their own families.

Taíno villages, were usually situated close to a water source, such as near a river, or along the coast, which provided protein rich foods. Villages were arranged around a cleared area, or plaza, in which religious ceremonies were held. Among the Classic Taíno, ball and dance courts were located in the village plazas, and were called bateys. These ball games also had religious purposes. The ball games served religious and social functions for the Taíno. Ceremonial dances, called areytos were held in the village plaza, and formed part of the religious and ceremonial life of the Taíno; singing and chanting also accompanied these

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The presence of these ballgames were indicative once again of elaborate social organization, and control of power.

The Taíno had a diverse diet, and made good use of the flora and fauna available to them in their island environment. The Taíno in the Bahamas, cultivated as many as fifty different plants, utilizing conuco cultivation, which were their staple foods. These included varieties of sweet and bitter manioc, sweet potatoes, cocoyams, beans, chilli peppers, corn, and groundnuts, as well as guava and papaya. Their main protein sources consisted of both marine and terrestrial animals such as fish, shellfish, turtles, the manatee, birds, and reptiles, such as snakes. Fish, however, were an important food source to the Taíno. Tobacco and cotton were important non-food crops, which were also cultivated. Tobacco being used for religious purposes as a hallucinogen, and cotton was used to make their items of clothing, as well as the hammocks on which they slept. These people, who descended from migrants from the South American mainland, were well-adapted to their island environments, and were capable, of not only utilizing the resources available to them, but manipulating the environment in which they lived, indicating a developing society, with adequate means of social control.

The Taíno had various hunting implements, designed to suit both marine and terrestrial hunting purposes. Weirs, baskets, fishing nets and fishing hooks were used in hunting marine based animals, and bows and arrows were used in hunting terrestrial animals. Labour was divided based on gender, even in food acquiring ways, and generally, men hunted and fished.

\footnote{Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean*, 275.}
\footnote{Keegan, *Talking Taino*, 4.}
\footnote{Reid, *Introduction*, 7.}
\footnote{Keegan, *Talking Taino*, 47.}
\footnote{Keegan, *Talking Taino*, 4.}
\footnote{Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean*, 272.}
and women cultivated the land which the men had subsequently cleared. Horticulture, and gathering, as well as food preparation was the domain of women.\textsuperscript{17}

The Taíno elite had extensive trading networks, which included goods such as carvings, guanin and gold objects, ceramics, stone objects, ritual implements as well as feathers, parrots and raw and woven cotton.\textsuperscript{18}Trading voyages also occurred, which facilitated the exchange of food items. The Taíno even had trading alliances with societies\textsuperscript{19} located on the South American mainland.

This discussion provided a background to Taíno society, briefly discussing Taíno geographical location, differences between Taíno societies, Taíno ancestry, their food acquiring ways, as well as their village layout and population statistics. The social and political life of the Taíno was also examined.

**Background of Gender/feminist archaeology as it pertains to the study.**

**Gender Archaeology (theoretical perspectives).**

This section will provide a discussion of gender archaeology, as it relates to the focus of this essay, which aims to explore the role of women in Taíno societies, to understand their daily lives and experiences, within a framework of gendered archaeology, from a feminist archaeology perspective, as it pertains to the Caribbean region. This section will begin by defining gender archaeology, and assessing its importance in relation to the study, after which a discussion of feminist archaeology will be provided. Gender archaeology utilizes the archaeological record, in analysing artefacts, in order to gain an understanding of the gender roles of men and women in past societies. Women were, to a large extent, globally and more so in the Caribbean, allotted an unequal amount of attention, as compared to men in academic

\textsuperscript{17} Keegan, *Talking Taino*, 47.
\textsuperscript{18} Reid, *Introduction*, 7.
\textsuperscript{19} Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean*, 274.
literature. Women are also largely written about in relation to men, not independent of their roles as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. However, “scholars argue that this invisibility of women in literature, even archaeological literature, is not due to a lack of data pertaining to women, but due to a false notion of objectivity and of the gender paradigms archaeologists use.” As such, women are left out of archaeological discussions, due to stereotypical thinking, based almost solely on the ideologies of the present time, the 21st century. This essay, which utilized various forms of literature pertaining to Taíno society, has provided an extensive, critical exploration of the lives of women in Taíno societies, proving this point.

Feminist archaeology, is archaeology written from the viewpoint of women in the present age, it provides a critical perspective, and differs from gender archaeology, in that it delves less into the archaeological record, and deals with, to a greater extent, the analysis of various theories in archaeology, critiquing existing theories, to allow for female advancement. Feminist archaeologists have critiqued two archaeological points as it pertains to the division of labour and the evolution of man.

The first point, is that archaeologists apply present day cultural norms to analysis of the past, as they view the sexual division of labour of past societies, as similar to the present. For example, activities such as hunting and trade are usually designated as being male dominated, while weaving and gathering are female dominated. Although this would be the present day ideology of past societies, unless reflected in the archaeological record, these assumptions should not be made about women’s roles in societies of the past. Not all women in prehistoric societies had simple, mundane lives, and even if they did, they would may not have necessarily viewed their contributions to the functioning of society with the same degrading lens westerns do.

The second critique made by feminist archaeologists is that archaeology is androcentric, placing greater importance on “male dominated” activities, and portraying women as dependent. In the literature, women are portrayed as being oppressed. Leadership, power, warfare, rights of inheritance, man the hunter, and the exchange of women are the main themes in writings of the past. However, feminist archaeologist, such as Margeret Conkey, has reassessed the “Man-the-Hunter” model, and placed women in a more influential position, within the development of society. Taíno women, as this essay will prove, featured prominently in politics as well as inheritance (which was matrilineal) and had great power. Although Taino women’s roles centered mostly around domestic activities, the activities contributed greatly to the functioning of society.

This essay is written within a gender archaeology framework, utilizing feminist archaeology, as women in Taíno societies were valued, gender equality was firmly established, and women of the nobility were highly respected, as inheritance was matrilocal, and kinship patterns were avuncular. The position of leader was inherited through the mother’s oldest brother. Women were engaged in not only the stereotypically female dominated areas such as agriculture and food preparation, but also, some women played a dominant role in politics and trade as well as manufacturing. One such woman, who was a female cacique, was Anacoana. However, it should be noted here that in Taíno societies, according to Spanish chroniclers, did the majority of the domestic work, in addition to tending to crops and animals, as well as producing handicrafts and pottery. Nonetheless, women’s work was described in relation to men’s work, and not explored independently, in most of the sources consulted.

As such, this essay, which seeks to explore the role of women in Taíno societies, to understand their daily lives and experiences, utilizing gender archaeology, in referring to the

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22 Hodder, Reading the Past, 168.
archaeology record, written from a feminist archaeological perspective, illustrates that Taíno women, has been overshadowed in the scholarship relating to Taíno societies, and it highlights this, allowing for a concise understanding of the somewhat elevated position of Taíno women within society.

**Description of Chapters.**

This essay explored the daily lives of Taíno women in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean within a framework of gender archaeology, to understand their roles in society, as well as their experiences, and how these changed as a result of the arrival of the Europeans. Chapter one explores the fields of gender and feminist archaeology, and how this essay fits into a framework of gender archaeology. Chapter two addresses the social positions of women within Taíno society, discussing their roles in the daily functioning of society, as well as their roles in politics. Chapter three explores the position of women in Taíno religion and cosmology. Chapter four examines the contact period between Europeans and the Taíno, investigating the archaeological evidence which indicates contact, as well as other evidence which indicates contact between both groups, and provides census data which indicated marriages between Taíno women and European men.
Literature Review.

In this section, a brief overview of the main sources consulted when conducting this research will be presented, and an explanation will be provided as to how these sources relate to my study.

“Columbus’s Outpost Among the Taíno” (2002) written by Kathleen Deagan and Jose Maria Curxent, was based on their archaeological investigation on the first town developed by the Europeans upon arrival in the New World, La Isabela, located in Hispaniola. This was one of the most informative sources consulted in undertaking this project. It provided information both about the Taíno, and their way of life, and Euro-Indigenous relations. As such, it covered the course of this study extensively. This book provided eye-opening information pertaining to the relationship between the Taíno and the Europeans, allowing for the development of a comprehensive understanding of how the coming of the Europeans altered the Taíno way of life. This source was also the main source which contained details pertaining to the archaeological record which indicated contact between the Europeans and the Taíno, specifically Taíno women. It also provided census information, which recorded marriages between Taino women and European men.

Samuel Wilson, in his edited volume “The Indigenous People of the Caribbean” (1999), presented an overview of the Caribbean, giving great insight into the culture, religion, language, social and political organization, trading patterns, food-getting patterns and lifeways of the Indigenous people of the Caribbean region. It proved useful to my study as it allowed for the development of an understanding of the lives of the Indigenous people, especially the Taíno, and helped me to understand how women were located within the Taíno society. It was the first source to bring to my attention numerous details which proved to be useful points in expanding my study, such as the fact that there was one isolated case of a
woman from an elite family, Anacoana, who was recognized as a cacique, and owned the means of production of duhos, which had an important ceremonial and economic role.

Another source which was consulted, was “Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean” (1997), edited by Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor. This source was the first source to indicate to me that the general Taíno population practiced matrilineal descent or inheritance, while the Taíno elites (Nitäños) shifted towards an avunculocal residence pattern. It also allowed for an understanding of the availability of mates within Taíno society, as the source indicated that among the Saladoid, who were the ancestors of the Taíno, there was competition for mates, indicated by the amount of food and other goods prepared for ceremonies. This book also provided an important point in this research, which was that Taíno women were involved in craft production, and produced sophisticated work. It also stated that during the Taíno ceremonial ball game, some teams consisted exclusively of women. This was also the first source providing an overview of women’s role in Taíno society, stating that women did most of the domestic work, as well as tended to the agricultural needs of the community, while also making exquisite pottery. This book, as compared to most other sources, gave greater attention to women in Taíno societies. There was no disparity between the amount of information centred around Taíno men and Taíno women.

Margaret Conkey, in her article “Has Feminism changed Archaeology?” (2003), presented a brief history of gender archaeology, and highlighted differences between the works of gender archaeologist in various parts of the world. It most importantly gave details about the impact of feminism on archaeology, and allowed for an understanding of how gender archaeology narrates the lives of women in the past, and changes their place in scholarly writings. This article proved very useful in allowing me to understand the impact of feminism on
archaeology, and how feminism has changed archaeology, and made women more visible in the literature by recognizing female imprints in the archaeological record.

Of the four sources mentioned, which was consulted to gain an understanding of the Taíno lifeways, “Columbus’s Outpost Among the Taínos,” written by Kathleen Deagan and Jose Maria Cuxent and “Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean,” edited by Fatima Bercht, Estrellita Brodsky, John Alan Farmer, and Dicey Taylor, were the two most useful sources pertaining to the aforementioned, and included numerous, insightful references about Taíno women, while “The Indigenous People of the Caribbean,” edited by Samuel Wilson provided good background reading, before delving deeper into the topic.

Limitations.

This study was limited by the word limit, which did not allow for an extensive discussion of all aspects of the lives of Taíno women, especially those women who were kidnapped by Carib warriors and their subsequent roles in cultural retention and cultural transformation, as they lived away from Taíno settlements, as well as women who migrated willingly. Also, there were no sources, either books or articles available which focused exclusively on Taíno women, or even women in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean.
Chapter 1.

Gender Archaeology and Feminist Archaeology.

Gender can be taken to refer to the state of being either woman or man, through subscription to cultural practices associated with particular genders. Sex, on the other hand, is biologically determined.

When thinking about archaeology, most people would picture in their minds a Caucasian man, wearing a hat and fatigues, digging up ancient relics with a very small tool under the hot tropical sun, in an underdeveloped country. Archaeology is defined as the study of the human past, and most present day archaeologists have subscribed to the view that archaeology is “a dominant, hegemonic product of western colonial domination.”

Traditionally, archaeology has been a discipline that is masculinist, and dominated by androcentric writing and interpretations of the past. It was also at its origins, a discipline dominated by the colonizers.

Archaeology, and by extension prehistory, up until the rise of gender and feminist archaeology was considered “a male territory, inhabited by people who play contemporary gender roles, with women being thrust into the domestic sphere and men being on the forefront of other activities.” Women in archaeological reports and accounts of prehistory were almost invisible, and almost no consideration was given to their social roles outside of the domestic sphere until gender and feminists archaeologies began gaining popularity.

Gender archaeology was born in the 20th century due to the women’s movement, which was most prominent in Scandinavia, North America and Australia, as was feminism and subsequently feminist archaeology. Gender archaeology can be defined as the investigation of the roles and meanings of gender in the past.

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26 Silberman, The Oxford Companion to Archaeology, 594.
As such, gender archaeology gives a voice to women in the past, seeking to allow them a place in archaeological investigation and writing, attempting to remedy the inequality in academic writing.

Feminist archaeology, is a theoretical approach which aims to transform and reshape the discipline of archaeology, and the notions about social lives in the past. Feminist archaeology aims to reinterpret the archaeological record, erasing the popular misconceptions about women in the past, and debunking myths perpetuated about women in past societies. Feminism is politically motivated, and this can be considered to be the major difference between gender archaeology and feminist archaeology. “Feminists are concerned with the processes in place which allow for patriarchy to dominate.” Feminist archaeology is important, as it not only reinterprets the archaeological record, but provides an explanation as to why misconceptions were perpetuated, and survived, for centuries, about women whose existence is evident in the archaeological record. Feminist archaeology utilizes the archaeological record, to give women their due in prehistory.

“Archaeology is written from a male perspective, and therefore the experiences of men is perceived as being normal.” However, this paper has been written from a female perspective, which utilized self-reflexivity in analysing the facts presented. This paper utilizes a feminist archaeological approach, which utilized gender archaeology, evident in the “narrative style of writing common to feminist archaeology.” This essay gives a voice to women who lived centuries ago, and has illustrated that the popularly held notion about women in prehistory, of women being submissive and dominated by men is not necessarily true, of Taíno women. The essay posits that while division of labour in Taíno society was gender-based, and non-elite women were found mostly in the domestic sphere, there was also

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[27] Silberman, The Oxford Companion to Archaeology, 569.
the case of a female leader, Anacoana, who controlled trade and the mass manufacture (according to today’s standards) of duhos, by her almost all female workforce. Also, it is important to note that women in Taíno society may not have held the denounced opinion of domestic work that modern societies do.

There are hidden hierarchies in the production of knowledge, which attempts to silence women’s voices, both in the past and the present. This essay, is an important contribution to existing historiography, as it has given a voice to the voiceless, to agents of social organization and control who has been obscured in academic writing, women who were imperative to the proper functioning of society. This essay, has proven that Taíno women were at the forefront of their societies, and valued, not devalued. This essay was written with the atrocities inflicted upon women in mind.
Chapter 2.

Social Positions of Women within Taíno societies.

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion pertaining to the social positions of women in Taíno society, discussing matrilineal inheritance in the society, division of labour, women’s role in the production of craft and pottery, women in the Taíno ball games, and women in production and trade, as well as the political influence of women. Polygyny is also discussed, as well as the possibility of women outnumbering men. All of these key points suggest that women were valued within Taíno society, and even though the evidence can be taken to mean that women were devalued, in comparison to men, critical analysis of the organization of Taíno society proves that gender equality was a feature of Taíno society.

The Taíno had a matrilineal inheritance pattern, and featured an avunculocal residence pattern among the nobility.30 As such, name and status was inherited from one’s mother. Also, the position of chief or cacique was inherited through the maternal line. Hence, the position of cacique was obtained from the brother of one’s mother and women of elite status within Taíno society were highly regarded.31 Also, Women often inherited property, which they passed down to their kin. Cemis, which were of religious significance, taken to be the representations of ancestors were also inherited through the mother’s line. Evidence suggests that at the time of Spanish contact, a few elite families had supreme control of power relations and authority, through the utilization of Taíno religious expressions, specifically ancestor worship, and the areytos.32 Hence, it can be deduced further, that elite women were valued more highly than non-elite women.

30Wilson, The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, 113.
32Bercht, Taíno:Pre-Columbin Art, 46.
It can be argued that after European contact, there were changes in the opportunities for political power among Taíno women. It has been stated that there were cases in which sons, wives, and sisters inherited the position of chief, which reflects the high level of male mortality which was the result of colonization.\(^{33}\) As such, this indicates that women gained new opportunities in politics, as a result of colonization, which implies that there could have been other female caciques, apart from Anacoana.

Nonetheless, women did the majority of the domestic work necessary for everyday life. Taíno society was hierarchal, and according to Spanish chroniclers, the women performed all the agricultural labour, with men’s roles being only hunting and fishing.\(^{34}\) Women were also the ones responsible for fetching water, preparing food, making pottery, and weaving, and as is customary in most societies both pre-literate and modern, childrearing.\(^{35}\) As such, women played extensive roles in not only leadership and power within Taíno society, but also in daily existence.

This seems to indicate a disparity in the social roles of women, as it is difficult to conceive of the notion that women of the Upper class, who often outranked men, would perform domestic tasks. It is well known that the Taíno had a social hierarchy, and as such women of the nobility possibly enjoyed greater comforts in life than did women of the lower classes. This indicates that female relatives of caciques were highly regarded.\(^{36}\) This point can be extended further, taking into consideration that members of the Upper class intermarried, and dominated religious practices and power relations.\(^{37}\) It should be noted, that women aspired to be the wife of the cacique, due to the increased comforts that came with that title.


\(^{34}\) Deagan, Kathleen A., and José María Cruxent, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos: Spain and America at La Isabela, 1493-1498*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 32.

\(^{35}\) Bercht, *Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art*, 37.


There is also the isolated case of a woman, of elite lineage, Anacoana, who was a female cacique reported by, Columbus’ chronicler. It has been stated that Taíno women often served as rulers or caciques. Anacoana, was the sister of the Cacique Behechio, and married the cacique Coanabo. This marriage cemented the alliance of two of the most important cacicazgos in Hispaniola. Eventually, her husband was captured by the Spaniards, in 1495, after which she returned to her ancestral home to rule alongside her brother, until her she was murdered by the Spaniards in 1503.

Anacoana, however, played a major economic role in Taíno society, as she oversaw the mass production of duhos, in a village which she owned, located on an island called Gonave off the coast of South Western Hispaniola (and her cacicazgo Xarangua). Anacoana was executed by hanging by Nicholas De Ovando in 1503, as a mark of respect, after he burned all of the other caciques alive. This indicates, that even after contact, she maintained her status, and even the Spanish colonizers respected her in her position of leader.

The duhos produced by her female workforce, and the subsequent ownership of these duhos by Taíno women indicates the political and military power of women, further indicating that female elites were influential in decision making and the management of the Taíno chiefdoms. As such, women were not always in a subordinate position to men. However, this further illustrates the point that there was disparity in the division of labour among women of elite status and women of the lower classes.

Taíno women had numerous political roles. Matrilineal inheritance was a major feature of Taíno politics, as the position of cacique was inherited through the mother’s line, and elite

38 Deagan, Columbus Outpost among the Taínos, 204.
39 Deagan, Columbus Outpost among the Taínos, 32.
40 Wilson, The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, 116.
41 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 61.
families controlled power relations within Taíno society. 43 As such, women played a major role in politics within Taíno society. This leads to the point of women’s involvement in the production of goods such as craft items and pottery. It was recorded that many of the more elaborate items were produced by women,44 and women produced exquisite pottery among the Taíno.45 In most societies, training in the production of arts and crafts indicates some social standing. The fact that women were better at crafts than men within Taíno chiefdoms can allow for the assumption than although elite women would have had a different life experience than non-elite women, the latter, in some cases, may have also had considerable value in the society, and impacted the functioning of society at the macro level. Needless to say, influence on the micro level was considerable.

Improving on the point of military and political power among Taíno women, is the fact that women took part in the ball game played by the Taíno, called bateys. Some teams consisted of women exclusively.46 This also underscores the importance of matrilineal inheritance in the society. These ball games had significant religious, social, and economic purposes.

The practice of polygyny was popular among members of the nobility. Often, a cacique, or other high ranking male, would have up to twenty or thirty wives, as much as he can support economically.47 There was often a superior chief’s wife, underscoring the importance of the social hierarchy. Often, after the death of a cacique, he would be interred, together with his superior wife.48 Marriage was important among the elite in the formation of political, social, and economic alliances, and women aspired to become the wife of the cacique.

43 Deagan, Columbus Outpost among the Tainos, 32.
44 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 17.
45 Bercht, Taíno Pre-Columbian Art, 41.
46 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 29.
47 Deagan, Columbus Outpost among the Tainos, 32.
48 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 23.
Spanish chronicler’s accounts indicate that there was a larger number of women than men, as it was stated that they encountered a town in Haiti which had more than two thousand men, and an infinite number of women and children. Women outnumbering men can also be supported by the accounts of Carib attacks on Taíno settlements, and their kidnapping of Taíno women.

This chapter discussed the social position of women within Taíno society, indicating that there was disparity within the division of labour between elite and non-elite women, arguing that elite women were highly influential in the management of Taíno chiefdoms, even if they did not hold the position of cacique, non-elite women were still important, as they produced arts and crafts which featured greatly in Taíno society. It went on to state that non-elite women did most of the work necessary for the functioning of society. The chapter basically states that despite the hierarchal nature of Taíno society, and the gender-based division of labour within Taíno society, women were valued, and even kidnapped by rival peoples (Island-Caribs) to be the wives of their warriors. Taíno women also took part in religious festivals, another indication of gender equality, to some extent.

49 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 33.
Chapter 3.

Taíno Women in Religion/Cosmology.

This chapter provides a brief analysis of Taíno women’s role in religion, and overall Taíno cosmology. It posits that matrilineal inheritance patterns within Taíno society, and the control of power relations by a few, elite Taíno families, is indicative of high social standing among elite Taíno women. The chapter also explores the religious roles of women, and their association within Taíno religion. Cemís, which featured importantly within Taíno societies were both male and female, and inherited mostly through the mother’s line. Duhos, both their production and inheritance was also inherently female. Also, men and women took part in festivals and worship, and some batey teams were exclusively female. This indicates that women were on equal terms in Taíno religion, upon contact. However, within Saladiod cosmology and worldview, women were depicted as being of the dark and profane realms, which indicates that there was an ideological evolution among the Taíno which resulted in improved status among Taíno women. The Taíno creation myth, will also be explored. Female Goddesses will be mentioned, and their roles in Taíno religion examined.

Religion in Taíno society will now be examined, with an emphasis on how women featured in the institution of religion. I will begin by mentioning that cemís, which were carved wood or stone objects, taken to be physical representations of deceased ancestors, were both male and female, and usually inherited through the mother’s line.50 This indicates that there was gender equality among the Taíno, in religious perspective. Women’s participation in religious ceremonies indicates another measure of gender equality among the Taíno.

However, this was not always the case. The Taíno were the descendants of the Saladoids, who were migrants to the Greater Antilles of the Caribbean region, from South America.

50Keegan, The People Who Discovered Columbus, 102.
Within Saladoid cosmology and worldview, which was similar to South American cosmology and worldview (the difference being adaptations to the island environment) the world was seen to be three-tiered, with three distinct layers representing various planes of reality. The Earth, which is featured as the middle plane, is represented as being surrounded by a layer above, and one below. The plane above earth was considered to be the sacred realm, represented by features such as the centre of houses, centres of villages, men, social life, ritual activity, food consumption, cooked food and beverages. In other words, the sacred realm in South American cosmology was represented by what was considered to be the desirable aspects of the human existence, which included the phenomenon of being male.

Alternatively, the profane realm, or the underworld, according to Saladoid cosmology, was represented by the periphery of houses and villages, women, children, domestic life, non-ritual activity, food production, and raw food. In other words, according to Saladoid cosmology, women were on an equal plane with children (immature), and taken together with the boring, or difficult and undesirable aspects of human existence.

However, as it was previously discussed, among the Taíno, women’s positions and roles in religion improved, and some of the main deities of the Taíno, under whose control were features of life such as food and the weather, were in fact not gods, but goddesses. Within the Taíno creation myth, is also the ideology of conception of supreme beings, without male intervention. This, marks a change in ideology from the period of Saladoid existence, to the period of Taíno existence.

The Saladoids existed within a deeper period in prehistory than the Taíno, who were a contact period population. As such, much more is known about the women in Taíno society, than women in Saladoid society, for which the main sources of research have been ethnographic.

51 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 109.
52 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 109.
accounts of modern day indigenous peoples of the south American mainland. The accounts of the Spanish chroniclers have been important sources of information about women in Taíno society. These eye-witness accounts have provided key points about the lives of Taíno women, which complimented data gathered from the archaeological record, in providing this narrative of the lives of women in Taíno societies.

One of the main Taíno gods, is Yucahu, a male deity in the Great Antilles, but according to the beliefs in the Guianas, this deity was called Yuca, and was female.\(^{53}\) This shift of the supreme being’s gender from the mainland to the Caribbean is indicative of the changing ideology towards women within the Caribbean context, as although the supreme being underwent a gender change, Yucahu’s mother, according to Spanish chroniclers, featured prominently in Taíno religious beliefs. Taking into consideration the ideology among the Taíno that supreme beings were conceived without male intervention, this indicates that increased importance in the religious sphere was given to women within Taíno worldview.

Yocahu Vagua Maorocoti, was the supreme god of the Taíno, indicated by his status as the giver of manioc, the staple food of the Taíno, and considered to be the god of the sea.\(^{54}\) His name basically translates to “spirit of Yuca, master of the sea, conceived without male intervention.” This indicates that his mother, Atabey, whom he lived in the sky with, was accorded the honour of creating mankind, even if indirectly, according to Taíno religious beliefs. She was the regarded as the goddess of the moon, tides and springs, as well as the protector of women in childbirth.\(^{55}\) Atabey, by extension was regarded as overseeing all water sources, indicating her importance, as water was needed to fertilize the crops.\(^{56}\) Fresh water, necessary for drinking and preparing meals, was controlled by Atabey, according to

\(^{53}\)Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 153.
\(^{54}\)Wilson, The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, 128.
\(^{55}\)Deagan, Columbus Outpost among the Tainos, 40.
\(^{56}\)Saunders, The Peoples of the Caribbean, 276.
Taíno religious beliefs. 57Both deities were regarded as influencing fertility. The Taíno, residing in the Caribbean region, which features prominently unstable weather systems, also worshipped the goddess Guabancex, who oversaw the winds, and hurricanes. 58 As such, it is evident that women featured prominently and positively within Taíno religious beliefs, as even though the supreme deity within Taíno religion was male, he was conceived by a woman, without male intervention, who also was a powerful deity. He was the God of cassava, but she was the goddess of water, which was necessary to fertilize the cassava crop. Also, weather was important in the daily life of the Taíno, as they were dependent upon stable and serene weather to hunt and fish, and thus obtain their main sources of protein within their diet, and also to cultivate and harvest crops. As such, the fact that the Goddess of the winds and hurricanes was Guabancex, a woman, can have a dual indication. On one hand, it can be considered a positive thing that a deity who controlled the weather, was female. However, on the other hand, this can be seen as a negative thing, as Caribbean weather is often unstable, this can be taken to mean that among the Taíno, women were seen as unstable and difficult to appease, hence the deity responsible for the weather being female rather than male.

Saladoid, and by extension South American cosmology is centred around phallocentric beliefs, and this was adapted in the Caribbean region, to some extent. Shamanism was a major feature of Taíno religiosity, evident not only by the Spanish chronicler’s accounts, but also by the archaeological record. 59 Shamans were the bridge between the physical world and the spiritual realm. They were usually men, as women’s biological functions such as menstruation, gestation and lactation were seen to be a hindrance to their control of the spirit world. As such, only post-menopausal women, honorary males were considered to be capable

57 Wilson, *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean*, 128.
of becoming a shaman. This however, was a mainland feature. Caciques promoted worship of their ancestors amongst their populations, and as such functioned to some extent as a shaman, as after cohoba induced trances, they were said to be able to communicate with their ancestors.

The purpose of this discussion within this essay, pertaining to the position of women within the religious beliefs of the Taíno is important, as under the institution of shamanism, women were considered, as has been noted previously to be hindrances. As such, the belief that sexual relations is equal to food consumption, may have been part of the religious beliefs of the Taíno. According to mainland beliefs, sexual intercourse with women often resulted in men become “feminised” and hence men practiced abstinence when partaking in masculine pursuits such as hunting, warfare, and even shamanism or spiritual connection with ancestors, as it was believed that by avoiding relations with women, the men would become “hypermasculine.” 60 Hence, although women held positions of power within Taíno society, to some extent they were stereotyped and avoided, as relations with said women could have been considered to be polluting. However, some women were leaders, such as Anacoana, and as such if her rule followed custom, she would have also had a religious role. Therefore, this can be taken to mean that not only was there disparity between elite and non-elite women in the division of labour, there was also disparity in how women were perceived within Taíno religion.

To conclude, this chapter examined Taíno women’s position and influence, and roles in the domains of Taíno religious beliefs and cosmology. It presented the argument that matrilineal inheritance patterns within Taíno society, and the control of power relations by a few, elite Taíno families, is indicative of high social standing among elite Taíno women. The chapter also explored the religious roles of women, and their association within Taíno religion.

60 Bercht, Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art, 154.
Cemís, which featured importantly within Taíno societies were both male and female, and inherited mostly through the mother’s line. Duhos, both their production and inheritance was also inherently female. Also, men and women took part in festivals and worship, and some batey teams were exclusively female. This indicates that women were on equal terms in Taíno religion, upon contact. However, within Saladiod cosmology, women were associated with realms considered to be dark and profane, which can be taken to indicate that there was an ideological evolution among the Taíno which resulted in improved status among Taíno women. The Taíno creation myth, was also explored, and female goddesses Atabey and Guabancex was mentioned, and their roles in Taíno religion examined.
Chapter 4.

Contact Period- Taíno women and their contact with the Europeans.

This chapter examines the contact between Taíno women, and European men. It posits that this contact was for the most part detrimental to the Taíno women, but not always, as though European men frequently abused the Taíno women, some of them also married these women, who bore children for them, forming the mestizo race. Taíno women also had some amount of revenge on the European men who raped them, as they transferred the pathogen syphilis, a New World virus to European men, this is explored in this chapter as well. Contact between both groups is evident in the fact that the diet of the European explorers was altered, and began resembling that of the Taíno people upon contact. Also, the archaeological record of La Isabela notes artefacts which suggests the presence of females at the site.

For the most part, contact between Taíno women and the Europeans was detrimental to the former. Apart from the outright abuse and brutality suffered at the hands of European men, Taíno women also suffered as a result of the diseases brought by the Europeans, to which they had no antibodies. One of more prominent Spanish chroniclers, Michel de Cuneo, is infamous for his account of the rape suffered by a Taíno woman, committed by himself. In his opinion, this atrocious act was an accomplishment. Women, as in many modern day societies suffered more than men, as a result of contact with the Europeans.

In Hispaniola, in around 1497, there was the phenomenon of alcalde Francisco Roldan, and his men, the “Roldanists.” Roldan wanted to rise above Columbus, and as such began rebelling, forming a separate European polity on Hispaniola, apart from La Isabela, which was founded by Christopher Columbus, in the name of the Spanish crown. Roldan was agitated, as one of his main supporters was punished for violating the wife of cacique

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61 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 201.
Guarionex, and as such, in a bid to undermine the authority of Columbus and his brother, he and his men roamed the island, seizing the food and women of the Taíno.⁶³ These innocent women, were victims, scapegoated for crimes they did not commit, revenge was taken upon them due to discrepancies between Europeans. These were, unarguably, negative aspects of the contact between European men and Taíno women.

The spread of syphilis to the Europeans is further evidence of contact between European men and Taíno women. This virus is a sexually transmitted disease, which, like Taíno women, originated in the New World. It quickly spread among European men in Hispaniola.⁶⁴ If the accounts of the Spanish chroniclers is not given merit, then the biological record should be taken into consideration. Syphilis was a known disease among the Taíno, and featured in their mythology. This is clear indication, that there was contact and relations between Taíno women and Spanish men.

However, the biological transfer of disease was mutual, as many of the pathogens which the Europeans brought greatly affected the Taíno, as they would not have had antibodies to prevent the transfer of diseases. As such, many indigenous people suffered as a result of contact with the Europeans, and it is to be expected that women featured prominently among these.

Although, it can be assumed that in most cases interaction between Taíno women and European men was not favourable for these women, there were exceptions, as there are accounts of Taíno women being married to European men. It was noted by Historian Gonzalo de Oviedo y Valdes, that in Hispaniola during the 16th century, Spanish men married important Indian women.⁶⁵ Also, census records show that in the town in Concepcion de la Vega, in 1514, there were forty-three encomenderos, and of these, 10 were married to Indian women.

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⁶³ Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 69.
⁶⁴ Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 151.
women. Encomenderos were landholders and also had access to Indian labour. This leaves the question of how a woman can be married to a man who “owned” her fellow countrymen, and potentially abused them? It is possible that these marriages could have been by force. How did the roles of these important women in Taíno society change, as a result of their new marriages, considering the matrilineal inheritance pattern prominent in Taíno society? Did they lose their important status?

Another Spanish town for which records exists was Puerto Real, which was founded in 1503. However, in 1514, population statistics for the town was gathered, and it was found that two men were married to Indian women. These men were amongst those of higher economic standing. If Taíno women married men of European descent who were well off financially, then what were their roles in the functioning of society? Did they have servants, who were Taíno as well?

Concepcion and Puerto Real both consisted of a significant number of women and children, as compared to the first Spanish town in the New World, La Isabela, which, according to the archaeological record was male dominated. The items found in the two more recent towns includes toys, jewellery, items of clothing, and less visibly in the archaeological record, items associated with household and domestic activities. This clearly indicates that there was increasing contact between European men and indigenous women as time passed.

However, this is not to be taken to mean that women were completely absent at La Isabela. Remarkably, a burial of a Taíno woman, and baby was discovered at that site. Also, bracelets which in the known World was popular among women of the contemporary period

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66 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 215.
67 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 216.
68 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 219.
69 Deagan, *Columbus Outpost among the Taínos*, 165.
were discovered at La Isabela.\textsuperscript{70} This indicates the presence of women at the site, or at least contact with these women.

Taken collectively, the remains from the 15\textsuperscript{th} century town and the 16\textsuperscript{th} century towns indicates growing contact with the progression of time among Taíno women and European men. This can either mean Taíno women considered relations with European men a better alternative to life among their own people, or conversely, a growing aggression on the part of European men, in capturing Taíno women.

These interracial marriages were encouraged by the Spanish crown, as the census records show. The \textit{repartimiento} of 1514 indicates that 54\% of the encomenderos on Hispaniola (there were 188 of them) had Taíno wives.\textsuperscript{71} Although data for lower-class Spanish males do not exist, it has been suggested that this figure would be higher for lower-class Spanish men. These marriages were important in establishing dominion of the newly discovered land, by the European powers.

Food preparation was the domain of women among the Taíno. Cassava bread was one of the main food items among the Taíno, and as such, the acquisition of the skill of preparing this, would only be possible through contact with Taíno women. European men, then had contact with Taíno women, as they learned how to make cassava bread, recorded by Ferdinand Colon. He stated that the Europeans obtained enough dough to make cassava bread to last them the entire return journey back to Europe.\textsuperscript{72} It is hard to imagine that Taíno women would teach anyone how to prepare sustenance under force. As such, there were probably some positive interactions between Taíno women and European men.

\textsuperscript{70} Deagan, \textit{Columbus Outpost among the Taínos}, 160.  
\textsuperscript{71} Deagan, \textit{Columbus Outpost among the Taínos}, 222.  
\textsuperscript{72} Deagan, \textit{Columbus Outpost among the Taínos}, 142.
However, under the encomienda system, the Taíno were forced to work for the Spaniards. This would undoubtedly disrupt the daily lives of Taíno women, leading to altered roles in the society, and unpleasant experiences. They would have had to adapt to be able to survive under the Europeans. There is also the question of whether or not these women worked under the same egalitarian division of labour within which they worked in their own societies, did they still do all the work pertaining to daily life; tending to crops and animals, preparing food, and other domestic tasks while men hunted and fished for the Europeans? This, undoubtedly were new roles for the Taíno women.

This chapter summarized the nature of contact between European men and Taíno women, detailing the transfer of pathogens, and citing evidence such as artefacts found in various European towns in the New World associated with women, as well as census records, to argue that there was sustained and increasing contact among European men and Taíno women as time progressed.
Conclusion.

This study examined the daily lives of Taíno women, reconstructing this by exploring their social, political, economic, and religious roles. It went further by also examining how the daily lives of Taíno women were impacted by the arrival of the Europeans, examining archaeological data, as well as census records and ethnohistorical accounts in achieving this. The study was conducted within the framework of gender archaeology, utilizing a feminist archaeological perspective. Today gender archaeology has influenced the discipline as a whole as it has provided for the utilization of the archaeological record in giving women their own sphere in the study of archaeology. Coupled with feminist archaeology, which is archaeology, written by women of the present age, mindful of the oppression of women, gender and feminist archaeology has changed the discipline of archaeology, which has focused mostly on men in writing about societies of the past.

This essay which has explored the daily lives of Taíno women, from a gendered, feminist archaeological perspective, and suggests that women in Taíno society may not have had such negative life experiences, before European contact, as some women, especially elite women, functioned within important political and leadership roles. The essay also posits that even non-elite Taíno women may not have had such negative life experiences, and even if, realistically they were thrust into the domestic sphere, they may not have viewed their daily mundane tasks (such as horticulture, gathering, food preparation, child rearing, etc) with the lenses that modern women do. Their perspective could have simply been that society had to function, and their roles were paramount in allowing this to occur, which is accurate.

Also, Taíno women may have been more valued than we realize, as apart from their domestic chores, they were trained in craft production and were the ones responsible for the production of duhos. Probably, all women in Taíno society, whether elite or non-elite, led more
enjoyable lives than they did after the arrival of the Europeans. With the arrival of the Europeans came a change in the lives of these women, even if not their daily lives. Contact is evident in the archaeological record, as the archaeological record of initial European towns on Hispaniola contains female oriented implements, such as feminine jewellery originating in the known World, and objects associated with domestic activities. This essay, when discussing the religious roles of Taíno women, indicated that some of the major deities of the Taíno were female, and as such, women figured prominently in Taíno religion.

No one can know for sure what occurred in the daily lives of the Taíno women, since the time machine has not been invented thus far. I cannot travel back to the pre-Columbian Caribbean, and observe these women going about their daily lives without being noticed, and placing my own perceptions of their activities upon them. What I have done, is taken the information available to me, from the historical and archaeological record, and analysed these in a bid to recreate the experiences of women who existed in a society very much different from my own, mindful of the androcentric tendencies of the historical and archaeological record, implementing everything I learned from gender archaeology and feminist archaeology, in writing this narrative about Taíno women.

**Recommendations.**

In future, researchers can expand upon this study, investigating other aspects of the lives of women who existed in Indigenous societies within the Pre-Columbian Caribbean. Women in other Pre-Columbian Caribbean societies can also be researched. Women are obscured in literature pertaining to prehistoric societies, which has is dominated by the lives and activities of men. More attention should be given to women in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean, by researchers and also educators.
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