Case 19-AM,C-Taino-Itiba Cahubaba-Great Bleeding Mother-Basalt



Case No.: 19

Accession Number:

Formal Label:

AM,C-Taino-Itiba Cahubaba-Great Bleeding Mother-Basalt

Display Description:

*Itiba Cahubaba*, “Great Bleeding Mother,” is a primary ancestor spirit among Taino deities called *cemís* (zemís). *Itiba Cahubaba* dies in childbirth, begetting quadruplets as depicted with two of the four held in each hand in the figure above. The quadruplets were symbols of the four cardinal points and the four elements: fire, water, air and earth involved in the myth of Yaya and his son Yayael that gave rise to the human species.

Identified by Caribbean scholar José Juan Arrom, Itiba Cahubaba is notable for her eyes, indicative of Taíno depictions of deities. Itiba’s emaciated arms, always folded over her bulging belly, represent the suffering of her creation. Cosmic navigator, Itiba Cahubaba wears a headdress with four trapezoid incisions that appear to depict the Caribbean winter (short) and summer (long) solstices. According to Arrom, the curvature of her cap informs Taíno navigation.

In Cuba, Itiba Cahubaba is associated with pregnancy, labor, delivery, and—among the people of the eastern mountains—the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the matron saint of the island. Many pregnant and post-natal women attend the Virgen’s shrine in supplication and thanks. Taíno descendants from the Sagua–Baracoa Mountains still make offerings and burn tobacco for the Mother Earth spirit and attribute the success of their crops and the potency of their traditional herbal medicines to her benevolence.1 The names of Caribbean Taíno cosmological personalities also continue to figure in the toponymy of the islands. There is a historic Río Cahobabo and a nearby village Playitas de Cahobabo in the easternmost part of Cuba. The local population from the region of Cahobabo sustains many Native herbal and culinary traditions.

LC Classification:

Date or Time Horizon:

Geographical Area:

Map:

GPS Coordinates:

Cultural Affiliation:

Medium:

Dimensions:   
Weight:

Provenance:

Condition:

Discussion:

the first woman to give birth and the ancestress of all humanity,

Recorded in a Taíno myth recorded ca. 1496 by Catalan Spanish Jeronymite Priest Ramón Pané (chapters IX-X),

First.

This sculpture provides visual representation of the anguish of *Itiba Cahubaba* in the last stages of pregnancy prior to her fate of dying in childbirth. Her mouth is in a grimace, and her spine is showing through her skin suggesting emaciation.

Second.

This sculpture provides visual representation of the placement of a surgical incision drawn 3-4 inches above her navel prior to the caesarean section that successfully resulted in the delivery of her quadruplets, four male children.

Third.

This sculpture invokes the Tainó world-view as a mixture of black as well as white, capacious enough to hold opposites in tension. Therefore, Tainós invoked opposites as dualities not as dichotomies in their world-view.

They could interpret the number “four” as fertility and as the inverse of fertility. Indeed, *Itiba Cahubaba* had to die to bring forth life.

In another myth Yayael, the son of Yaya, a mythical cacique, was banished from his home island. He was commanded to seek a new home elsewhere. However, he broke this commandment and returned after 4 months only to be ritually executed by his father for not heeding his father’s sentence of total banishment. Among island people the carrying capacity of the island was of paramount importance to a cacique and the people over whom he was designated to protect, and banishment was one way to address the problem of over-fertility that could outstrip an island’s necessarily limited natural resources and put everyone at risk.

The moral was that human over-fertility could disrupt the carrying capacity of an island and hence could be a real danger to the whole community, as in the case of *Itiba Cahubaba’s* quadruplets. The births were not only a blessing, but, also, conversely, a curse, for it imperiled the Tainó idea of “sexuality in the service of the community” and, from this perspective, over-fertility was a goal *not* to be emulated.