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The Mystery of the Cotton Tipití

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In his article on "The Arawak" in Volume 4 of the *Handbook of South American Indians,* under the heading of "Subsistence Activities," Irving Rouse wrote as follows:

> The method of preparation [of bitter manioc by the Taíno] was to scrape the skin off the root with a piece of flint, to shred the root on a board set with small pieces of flint, and to squeeze the juice out of the shreds in a woven basketwork or cotton tube. One end of the tube was hung from a branch; the other was weighted with a stone or else a woman stood on a cross bar attached to the tube. From the shreds she made a cake, baked it on a discoidal clay griddle (buren) set on three stones over the fire, and parched it in the sun (1948:523).

The "woven basketwork" device was clearly the familiar tipití. For years, though, I continued to be puzzled by the "cotton tube," which presumably was a tipití as well. The reason for my perplexity was that in all my reading on Amazonia and the Caribbean I had never come across any mention of a cotton tipití. Was there really such a thing? The question continued to nag me, but I did nothing about it.

Finally, in August of 2003, after years of fruitless wondering, I decided to write to Dr. Rouse and ask him for his source for this "cotton tube." In reply, he remarked that his statement was based on a passage in H. Ling Roth's article, "The Aborigines of Hispaniola," published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1887.

It so happened that I had had a xerox copy of this article in my files for years, but had never gotten around to reading it. In fact, I had forgotten all about it. Now, in connection with another project I was working on, I had recently read what Las Casas and Oviedo had said about manioc processing among the Taíno, and although each gave a pretty full account of the process, neither of them said a word about a cotton tipití. Obviously, the next step in my quest to unravel the mystery of this device was to read Ling Roth's article and see what he had said about it.

Although in preparing to write his article Roth seems to have consulted all the primary sources on the Taíno (including Las Casas and Oviedo), when it came to matters of subsistence and food processing he had relied chiefly on the account given by Girolamo Benzoni. According to Roth

(1887:248), while Benzoni

> " ... did not visit the New World until about 1541, he spent fourteen years there ... At the time of Benzoni's visit the native Haytians were reduced to under 4,000 ... This would detract from the value of Benzoni's statements were it not for the fact that on account of poverty he was obliged to mix with the Indians almost on terms of equality—he was so destitute that he had to make his own cassava bread ... the information he gathered was [thus] practically obtained" (Roth 1887:248-249).

On this basis, Roth (1887:256) went on to say—quite erroneously, I might add—that "Benzoni gives us the best account of the mainstay of these natives, which was bread made from maize and from the roots we call cassava." He then quoted Benzoni's (1857:85) brief description of how the Taíno treated bitter manioc roots: "they peel them and cut them with sharp stones that they find on the beach, and putting them into a rag, they squeeze out the juice, which would be poison to anyone drinking it ..." (Roth 1887:257).

A lot hinges, therefore, on the meaning of "rag." Or, more precisely (since Benzoni wrote in his native Italian) what Italian word he used that his English translator chose to render as "rag." At this point it became necessary to consult Benzoni's book, *History of the New World,* which in English translation was published by the Hakluyt Society in 1857. The translator, W. H. Smyth, evidently felt some uncertainty on this score since, immediately following his use of the word "rag," he introduced a footnote saying: "A rag (una pezza), to our minds, would presuppose the arts of spinning and weaving" (Smyth in Benzoni 1857:85n.).

So now the issue came down to the meaning of *"pezza."* In my Italian dictionary, the English synonyms given for this word are "patch, piece, bolt (of cloth)." So Smyth's rendering of *pezza* as "rag," in the absence of any further clues about it, seemed reasonable. Since Smyth was apparently unfamiliar with the tipití, his speculations about the device referred to by Benzoni were limited to the manner of its construction rather than its shape or its method of operation. And so all he found himself able to say about it was that it "would presuppose the arts of spinning and weaving" (Smyth in Benzoni 1857:85n.).

In quoting Smyth's translation, Ling Roth did not go beyond this either. He took the passage at face value and raised no questions about the nature of this "rag." Benzoni had said only that it was a rag into which the natives put manioc in order to squeeze out the poison. He had not described it as being a "tube" or a "press," and so neither did Roth. It is quite possible—since his field work was carried out in Australia—that

Roth was unfamiliar with the details of manioc processing, and was thus in no position to flesh out this "rag" into a full-fledged tipití

Rouse, however, was familiar with the tipití. And he concluded that Roth's "rag," since it was a device for squeezing bitter manioc, must have been a kind of tipití. And thus he felt justified in giving a more specific identity to this "rag" by calling it a "cotton tube." In doing so, he made two reasonable inferences: (1) that if the item cited by Roth was indeed a "rag," it most likely was woven of cotton; and (2) that if it was used to squeeze manioc, it must have been a tipití, and therefore would have had the shape of a tube. Putting the two inferences together, he referred to the second type of Taíno manioc squeezer as a cotton tube. And to me, this could only have meant a cotton tipití.

I should add here that Rouse himself had some uncertainty about the nature of this "rag." In his letter to me he said: "I took this to mean cotton cloth, but I must admit that this statement is not very specific." And in his major work, *The Tainos,* Rouse (1992:12) apparently abandoned—or at least set aside—any notion of a cotton tipití, for in discussing the processing of manioc by the Taíno he says only: "Women grated its starchy roots and squeezed out its often-poisonous juice in a basketry tube ... " with no longer any mention of a cotton tube.

So where does that leave the issue? Without doubt, the uncertainty regarding the nature of this device must be laid at the door of Girolamo Benzoni. It was his imprecise, and even incorrect, use of words that has caused all the confusion. In passing, it should be pointed out that Benzoni's shortcomings as a chronicler were already evident to Smyth, his translator, who considered his book "ill-written," remarking that its author "scorns the trammels of orthography" (Smyth in Benzoni 1857:ii, 61). Roth himself (1887:248), while placing undue reliance on Benzoni, nevertheless called him "an illiterate man." More to the point than the failings of his writing style, however, is the fact that Benzoni was a casual and superficial observer of native practices—or at the very least, was imprecise in describing what he saw.

However, Roth must also share some of the blame for putting too much credence in—or at least failing to try to verify—Benzoni's sketchy and bare-bones account of Taíno subsistence. Roth was, in fact, very wide of the mark when he stated that of all the primary sources on the Taíno, Benzoni gave "the best account of the mainstay of these natives …" (1887:256).

The use of the word "pezza" was one example of Benzoni's slapdash descriptions. After all, he had lived quite some time among the Taíno and must have seen bitter manioc being squeezed countless times. It is

hard to understand why he did not describe its processing, and the device used to do so, with more exactitude. And on the same score, it is hard to understand why Roth also failed to do so, since he could have found the Taíno tipití and its uses adequately described in the writings of Las Casas (1909:30) and Oviedo (1950:96-97).

Now, if someone wished to make a desperate effort to salvage Benzoni's credibility in this regard, he could argue that a *pezza* accurately labels, not a tube at all, but a plaited web, like the wrap-around manioc squeezer used by the Witoto (Whiffen 1915:98-99, 132; Carneiro 2000:76-79). However, nothing remotely resembling this device has ever been reported for northern South America or the Caribbean.

I must admit, though, that for a time I was disposed to accept the reality of the cotton tipití. Indeed, in my letter to Rouse acknowledging receipt of his reference to Roth's article, I went so far as to say that "I should think a tipití made of cotton would be very effective, since it would have a maximum [of] flexibility."

However, the more I have thought about the matter since then, the more I have become convinced that I was wrong. A tipití woven of cotton would make a very inefficient manioc squeezer. In the first place, a tipití needs to be springy, so that when it is compressed from opposite ends in loading, it bows out, making it easy to fill. Then, after it has been filled, it should spring back to as close to its original shape as its manioc contents permit. Woven out of cotton, however, a tipití would be too flaccid to allow this. It would not spring out when compressed, nor spring back after filling. Furthermore, it would have a second disadvantage. As I remarked in my second letter to Rouse: "given the tension the tipití is subjected to in daily use, I suppose [that one made of cotton] wouldn't have lasted as long as those made of the stiff strips that were used by most Tropical Forest tribes."

In conclusion, I am now entirely persuaded that the cotton tipití was a chimera. It never existed. It arose out of a good-faith effort on Rouse's part to interpret a cryptic passage in a primary source which had been picked up and copied—uncritically—by an otherwise reliable secondary source.

The lesson to be learned is that in reconstructing the culture of a long-vanished people, like the Taíno, we are at the mercy of contemporary accounts. And while these sources oftentimes prove to be rich and reliable, they occasionally mislead. And when they do, some curious errors—like this one—are liable to result.

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