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Arie Boomert



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NAMES FOR TOBAGO

Arie BOOMERT *

The names of the islands of the Caribbean often form the oldest recorded toponyms of these islands. A good number of them owe their present name to Columbus who was profoundly concerned with the choice of names for the new world he had come across, as the act of naming symbolized taking possession. Relatively few islands have retained their original, Amerindian, name. Jamaica is an example while Haiti represents an indigenous toponym which initially applied to the entire island of Hispaniola (Taylor 1958). Tobago is one of the southernmost islands of the West Indian archipelago and at present forms part of the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The name Tobago is often assumed to be of Amerindian derivation, whereas its origin is actually Spanish. In fact, two now obsolete, genuinely Amerindian names are known for the island. Both were recorded in the seventeenth century. The etymology and origin of the European as well as Amerindian names of Tobago form the subject of this essay.

The first recorded name for Tobago may have been coined by Columbus. The island was probably sighted by the Admiral on August 4 or 5, 1498, when his ships were anchored in the Dragon's Mouths between Trinidad and the Paria Peninsula, close to present Punta Garcitas. According to Las Casas, Columbus spotted an island « with very high ground » 26 leagues to the northeast from this position. He called it *Belaforma* « because from a distance it seemed beautiful » (Las Casas 1957-1961, I, p. 357 ; Morison 1963, p. 270). Whether or not this island was Tobago, is disputed. Morison first claimed to have sighted Tobago from the top-gallant yard of his ship when sailing out of the Bocas on the track of Columbus in 1940 (Morison 1942, II, p. 261). However, afterwards he felt that he, like the Admiral, had mistakenly taken an outlying cape of Trinidad for an island (Morison 1955, p. 112 ; Morison 1963, p. 272 ; Morison & Obregón 1964, p. 157).

Interestingly, Las Casas' abstract of Columbus' 1498 journal refers to two islands discovered by the Admiral on leaving the Dragon's Mouths on August 13 and 14. According to Las Casas, Columbus sighted an island 26 leagues to the north of the Bocas, which he named *isla de la Asumpción*. (It was the vigil of the Assumption of the Virgin, a feast which is celebrated on August 15.) Besides, he spotted another one Columbus called *la Concepción* (Las Casas 1957-1961, I, p. 368 ; Morison 1963,

* Havikweg 24, 1826 JV Alkmaar, The Netherlands. E-mail : aboomert@hotmail.com

p. 278). The fact that the distance between *Asumpción* and the Dragon's Mouths is similar to that between the latter and *Belaforma*, suggests that these two names actually refer to one and the same island, i.e. Tobago. Indeed, Devas (1974, pp. 10, 17-18) has identified *Concepción* as Grenada and *Asumpción* as Tobago, claiming that at sea Grenada and Tobago can be seen only from distances of 20-25 miles or less. This opinion has been accepted by Morison, who notes that Columbus apparently made a wide sweep to the east and north going out of the Bocas (Morison 1963, pp. 267, 279 ; Morison & Obregón 1964, pp. 111, 167). However, it should be noted that on exceptionally clear days in the wet season Grenada can be viewed from high ground on Tobago's west coast, while the distance between these two islands is much larger than that between the Dragon's Mouths and Tobago (see Boomert 2000, p. 20).

Nothing is heard about *Belaforma* or *Asumpción* afterwards and from as early as 1511 Tobago appears on maps and in Spanish documents under its present name. Numerous variants of the island's name are to be found in the sixteenth-century Spanish sources. It is spelled as *Tavaco* in 1511 and 1512 (Jiménez 1986, pp. 129-130 ; Spanish Crown, *CDU*, V, pp. 258-261), as *Tabacho* on Ribeiro's world map of 1529, as *Tabaco* in 1533, ca 1545 and ca 1560 (Anonymous ca 1560 ; Oviedo ca 1545 ; Spanish Crown, in Konetzke 1953-1962, I, pp. 145-146), as *Tabago* on Honem's map of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean dating from ca 1540, and as *Tavago* in 1569 (Otte 1967, I, p. 21), to mention only the first references — the interchange of consonants in the spelling of some forms is due to the Spanish pronunciation of a *v* as a *b*. The island remained to be called *Tabaco* or *Tabago* in Spanish throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (e.g. Gumilla, 1963, p. 43). Whereas these two forms of the name are found in late-sixteenth century English documents (Keymis 1904, p. 478), it became *Tubago* (Dudley 1646) and *Tobago* (Anonymous 1642) by as early as the mid-seventeenth century. The Dutch continued to use the variants *Tabaco* and *Tabago* until well into the eighteenth century (e.g. De Laet 1931-1937, II, p. 21 ; Rochefort 1665). While in the mid-seventeenth century French sources refer to Tobago as *Tabuco* or *Tabac* (Breton, 1999, p. 204 ; Moquet, cited by Nardin 1962), until recently the French, like the Spanish, still spoke of *Tabago* rather than *Tobago*¹.

Origin and meaning of the name Tobago have been the subject of a long-lasting discussion. As is indicated by its sixteenth-century variants, the original name of the island was undoubtedly *Tabaco*, i.e. the Spanish word for « tobacco ». The noun *tabaco* has remained unvaried in Spanish throughout the centuries ; it is comparable to derivatives such as modern French *tabac* and Dutch *tabak*. The seventeenth-century English alteration from *Tabaco* or *Tabago* to *Tobago* is reflected by the vowel change from *tabaco* to *tobacco* in this language. The latter variant is undoubtedly related to the Dutch noun *toebak*, a now obsolete form which is synonymous to *tabak*. Unfortunately, the origin of the Spanish word *tabaco* is often misunderstood. Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica* and *N. tabacum*) is an indigenous cultivar of tropical America which the Spanish as the first Europeans only learned to know as a result of Columbus' voyages to the West Indies. It is frequently assumed that together with knowledge of the tobacco plant the Spanish adopted the term *tabaco* as a loanword from Taíno, the Arawakan language of the contact-period Amerindians of the Greater Antilles

(Brinton 1871 ; Friederici 1960, pp. 576-580, 769-770 ; Furst 1992 ; Lovén 1935, p. 393 ; Oxford English Dictionary 1971, II, pp. 95-96).

However, according to Oviedo, the Taíno did not apply the term *tabaco* to the tobacco plant, but to an Y-shaped tube which he believed the Indians used to inhale tobacco smoke through their nostrils « in order to go out of their senses » by putting the end of the tube « in the smoke of the burning herb » (Oviedo, in Schleiffer 1973, pp. 138-139 ; see also Humboldt, 1852-1853, I, p. 329). This is contradicted by Las Casas (in Schleiffer 1973, pp. 79-80), who indicates that this tubical instrument was employed for sniffing powdered substances with hallucinogenic properties during ritual gatherings, rather than for inhaling fumes. It is generally assumed that, depending on the occasion, during these so-called *cohoba* ceremonies the Taíno *caciques* or shamans (*behiques*) either took tobacco or *yopa*, i.e. the crushed seeds of a leguminous tree (*Anadenanthera peregrina*), in order to get into a trance during which their souls were able to contact the spirit world (see Lovén 1935, pp. 387-390, 397-398 ; Pané 1999, pp. 15, 21, 25-26 ; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, pp. 5-9, 227-229 ; Stevens-Arroyo 1988, pp. 117-119, 122-124 ; Wassén & Holmstedt 1963 ; Wilbert 1987, pp. 16, 18, 54). Moreover, according to Las Casas again, in his time the word *tabaco* was applied to the long, tube-shaped cigars of rolled tobacco leaves which the Taíno shamans were accustomed to smoke for healing purposes and commoners for relaxation (see also Columbus 1992, pp. 65, 70 ; Wassén 1964).

To add to the confusion, it is well possible that the Spanish did not adopt the word *tabaco* from the Taíno at all. In the early-fifteenth century, thus long before the European discovery of the Americas, a similarly sounding noun was known in both Spanish and Italian, denoting particular medicinal herbs, some of which caused euphoria and others dizziness. It is generally assumed that this word, spelled variously as *tabaca*, *tabauco* and *atabaca* in the documentary sources, is derived from a medieval Arab word, *tabbâq* or *tubbâq* (Corominas 1954, IV, pp. 318-321) ². This suggests that rather than adopting a Taíno loanword, which at any rate was not used to indicate the tobacco plant as such by the Indians of the Greater Antilles, the Spanish applied an existing Old World term, used for denoting herbs causing similar effects as tobacco ³. Whatever its origin, by the early 1500s the word *tabaco* was firmly incorporated in the Spanish vocabulary as the name of the tobacco plant and from Spanish it spread to all other European languages. In the time of Oviedo, who arrived in Hispaniola as late as 1512, i.e. after most of the Taíno had died (Wilson 1990, pp. 8-9), apparently the origin of the name had been forgotten already, even in the West Indies. Most importantly, the Spanish also applied the name *tabaco* to the cigars of rolled tobacco leaves such as Las Casas and Benzoni (in Schleiffer 1973, pp. 140-141) noted that the Taíno smoked. At present « cigar » is indicated by three words in Spanish, i.e. *cigarro*, *puro* and *tabaco* (e.g. Ernst 1889).

The complicated history of the term *tabaco* should be kept in mind when assessing the widely varying interpretations of the name *Tobago*, to be found in the literature. First of all, the etymology of the word *tabaco* indicates clearly that the name of the island was coined by the Spanish, not by the local Amerindians. This is shown also by the fact that the indigenous peoples of the Lesser Antilles, Trinidad, Tobago, and the mainland of South America had quite different names for Tobago. However, by the mid-sixteenth century Tobago and the Spanish name for the tobacco plant had

become so firmly linked that in 1577 the Spanish physician Monardes (in Schleiffer 1973, p. 142) even believed that the word *tabaco* was derived from the supposedly Amerindian name of the island. His opinion is echoed by several later writers, including Rochefort (1665, pp. 56-57) who thought that the Spanish learned the cultivation of tobacco from the Carib Indians living in Tobago at the time of the discovery. A similarly mistaken line of reasoning is followed by Dauxion-Lavaysse (1820, p. 341) and, more recently, by Goslinga (1971, pp. 433-434). In this respect it is noteworthy that the indigenous Amerindians had names for the tobacco plant, quite different from those used by the Spanish and the Taíno. The Kalina (Caribs) and Lokono (Arawaks) of the mainland and Trinidad called it *taman* (*tamun*) and *ióri* (*iuri*), respectively, while the Kalinago (Island Caribs) of the Windward Islands used the term *ioilli*, which is cognate to the Arawak word (Anonymous 1928, p. 264 ; De Goeje 1939, p. 66 ; Lovén 1935, pp. 387, 389 ; Taylor 1977, pp. 19, 23).

Another explanation of the name Tobago first appeared in the literature when Reeves (1749, p. 24) suggested that the island has been called after the Y-shaped sniffing tube of the Taíno, erroneously named *tabaco* by Oviedo, as Tobago's form would closely resemble that of the instrument. This interpretation is repeated by numerous later writers, including Fowler (1774, p. 8), Young (1807-1812, p. 2), Martin (1836, I, p. 232), Woodcock (1867, p. 19), and, in the twentieth century, by Aspinall (1934, pp. 114-115), Anderson (1970, p. 47), Ottley (1970, p. 29), and Archibald (1987-1995, I, p. xi). It is quite obvious that this opinion is just as fallacious as the previous one discussed. By no stretch of imagination the island's form can be likened to an Y, of course. However, by attempting to explain the process of naming, Reeves hits the right trail to a satisfactory interpretation of the toponym. If seen from the ocean, namely, the appearance of Tobago resembles that of the long, fat Taíno cigar which was called *tabaco* by the Spanish. This likeliness is caused by the island's contour which from almost level in the southwestern part of Tobago slowly rises to reach an almost continuous summit in the Main Ridge area in order to descend abruptly and almost vertically to the sea in the northeasternmost portion of the island. The dark brown to black appearance of the Main Ridge precipices in parts of the island undoubtedly further added to the resemblance.

We may conclude that the name *Tobago* represents a descriptive toponym, coined by some unknown Spanish sailor, possibly a slaver from Hispaniola, who passed by the island in the first decade of the sixteenth century and called it *Tabaco* as its contour reminded him of the cigars the Taíno were accustomed to smoke. The resultant European association of Tobago with tobacco may have influenced the island's course of history to a certain extent. Indeed, it can be suggested that the first colonization attempts of Tobago by the Spanish, English, Dutch and Courlanders (Latvians), which were initiated almost a century after the island received its name, were stimulated not only by its crucial strategic position well to the windward of almost all of the other islands of the Lesser Antilles and by Tobago's fine climatic conditions and excellent natural harbours, but perhaps also by the belief that tobacco would grow better in *Tabaco* island than anywhere else in the West Indies.

As noted above, the Amerindians of Tobago itself and neighbouring islands had quite different names for Tobago. Two of these have been recorded in the

documentary sources. In the 1620s the Spanish writer Vázquez de Espinosa noted that « Tobago is called Urupaina in the Indian language, meaning big snail », adding that the island is « inhabited by Carib Indians, who used to ravage the island of Trinidad » (Espinosa 1942, p. 57). In the mid-seventeenth century Tobago is indeed reported to be inhabited by Amerindians ethnically belonging to the Cariban-speaking Kalina, i.e. Caribs who formerly lived also in North Trinidad and still inhabit parts of the Orinoco Valley and the Guianas (Boomert 1986, p. 14 ; Pelleprat 1965, pp. 36, 83-84). This would suggest that the name *Urupaina* represents a Cariban word. If so, it may be related to *oruape*, a generic term documented in 1789 as the Kalina word for « large snail » (Anonymous 1928, p. 221). Consequently, it can conjecturally be suggested that, like the Spanish, the Kalina Indians were struck by the characteristic contour of Tobago, seen from the ocean, which reminded them of the outlines of the large marine gastropods to be found in the Caribbean.

The second name for Tobago, to be found in the historic literature, was recorded by the French missionary Raymond Breton who worked among the Kalinago (Island Caribs) of the Windward Islands, especially Dominica and Martinique, in the mid-seventeenth century. Breton (1999, pp. 204, 269, 1900, p. 373) notes that the Island Caribs called Tobago *Aloubaéra*, but does not explain the meaning of this name⁴. The present author first suggested that the name may be related to *beléuera* or *beréuera*, i.e. the Island Carib name of the West Indian Crown Conch or Black Conch (*Melongena melongena*), an edible marine gastropod which is found in mangrove swamps throughout the Caribbean. This name appears to be a compound of *béle*, « soft, sticky », and *éuera*, « tool, penis » (Taylor 1956 ; see Breton 1999, pp. 37, 114, 165), thus referring to the animal itself, not to its shell, and, consequently, its etymology would be remarkably similar to that of the name *Urupaina* (Boomert 2000, p. 20). In this respect it should be noted that the Island Caribs spoke a basically Arawakan language, quite comparable to Taíno and Lokono, of which the male register included a large number of Kalina loanwords.

However, Breton (1900, p. 90) mentions the same word he records as the Island Carib name for Tobago, in a quite different context when stating that « la couleuvre, ou escarboucle » of Dominica is known as *alloüebéra* (also Breton 1999, p. 17). Elsewhere he notes that the Amerindians of the Windwards paint their canoes with red pigment, which they believe to represent the excrement of a « grosse couleuvre qu'ils appellent *oloubera* qui est dans une caverne effroyable » (Breton 1978, p. 70 ; also Breton 1900, p. 173). This monstrous snake is a mythical animal which takes a prominent place in Island Carib cosmology. Apart from Breton, its presumed existence was documented by seventeenth-century chroniclers such as Bouton, Provins and Rochefort among the inhabitants of Dominica, Martinique and St Vincent (Allaire 1981). The myth in question refers to a large snake or dragon that can make itself large or small at will. Moreover, it bears a bright, red jewel or carbuncle on its forehead which is moveable like a human eye-lid and is exposed when the snake is drinking, illuminating the surroundings. This bejewelled snake (boa) lives in a twin mountain inside a deep cavern where it deposits a red excrement, killing anyone who approaches it unless one has fasted and abstained from sexual intercourse for at least three days.

As late as the 1940s the belief in this monstrous snake was still extant among the Island Caribs of Dominica. The bejewelled snake, known as the Master Boa (*Maître Tête-Chien*), is described as « big, big, big », wearing « a diamond crest on its head » and crowing « just like a cock ». It was supposed to live in a cave, situated in the hills of the northern part of the island, where a gigantic stone heap, forming a kind of natural stairway, is attributed to its activities (Taylor 1952a). Various other tales, recorded in Dominica and among the Garifuna of Belize, i.e. the descendants of the Black Caribs of St Vincent, can be associated with the myth of the bejewelled snake. One of them features a child with a human head and snake's body, called *Bakamu*, which was born to a woman who had an affair with a boa. The child became so demanding that she put him into a large conch and fled. Chasing her, he was swept away by a flood and became a constellation which takes the form of a snake with a human head and a big red eye (Gullick 1985, pp. 100-101 ; Petitjean Roget 1994, 1995 ; Robiou-Lamarche 1990 ; Taylor 1938, 1945, 1946, 1951, pp. 143, 153-154, 1952a, 1977, pp. 240-242). A related tale is known from St Vincent. This narrates the story of *Racumon*, one of the first Caribs, who took the shape of a large snake with human head and now forms a star (De la Borde 1886). Finally, Breton (1978, p. 52) refers to *Kalinago*, the first Carib, who was metamorphosed into a monstrous fish or boa, named *Acaïouman*, « which still lives in the rivers ». Indeed, as late as the 1950s in Dominica a river called *Akáyu* was known to represent the abode of the *Maître Tête-Chien* (Taylor 1980).

All of this suggests that the Island Caribs called Tobago, *Aloubaéra*, after the giant bejewelled snake, *alloïébéra* or *oloubera*, that took such a prominent position in their mythology. Clearly, they believed that the outline of Tobago closely resembled that of the monstrous serpent, just as their relatives the Kalina and the Spanish compared the island with the outlines of a conch next to a cigar, respectively. The mountainous northeastern part of Tobago was apparently believed to represent the head of the animal while the rest of the island symbolized its body. If indeed Tobago was taken by the Island Caribs to personify the Antillean bejewelled snake, an Amerindian tale on the island, recorded by Rochefort in the mid-seventeenth century, becomes intelligible as referring to this mythical serpent. According to Rochefort (1665, pp. 116-117), the *Caraïbes* called a mountain in Tobago's northeastern portion the « mountain of the devil », as « fires that illuminate in the night » are often to be seen here. The Indians were afraid of this phenomenon, which they attributed to malevolent spirits.

As the northeastern part of Tobago would have symbolized the head of the bejewelled snake, the « fires » observed by the Indians in this part of the island may have referred to the bright, red eye on the forehead of the mythical animal which, if exposed, is believed to have illuminated its surroundings⁵. Rochefort supposed that the « fires » were caused by naturally occurring deposits of sulphur, which were lit due to the heat of the sun in the daytime. Although obviously this explanation should be rejected, it is well possible that at times the sun's reflection on the occasionally bare outcrops of phyllitic sericite schists which predominate the rocks of the northern third of Tobago (Maxwell 1948 ; Rowley & Roobol 1978), gives the impression of a source of light in this area. It may have reminded the Amerindians of the bright jewel on the forehead of the Antillean monstrous snake.

NOTES

1. The first recorded variant of the island's name is mistakenly spelled as *Cobaco* or *Cabaco* by Sauer (1966, p. 193), Jesse (1963) and Nardin (1962).
2. The resemblance between the word « tobacco » and Island Carib *bitábaco*, « thy shut-eye », noted by Taylor (1952b), appears to be accidental.
3. It should be kept in mind that the Taíno probably used *Nicotiana rustica*, which has the highest nicotine content of all tobacco species, in order to intoxicate themselves and reach an ecstatic-visionary state (Furst 1992).
4. De Goeje (1936) mentions a Spanish variant of this name, *Arubeira*, but does not specify its source.
5. Even today there are reminiscences of tales possibly related to the myth of the bejewelled snake among the peasant and fishermen population of Tobago. According to Caesar (1984), there exists a belief in Plymouth on Tobago's leeward coast that there lives a cock with fire on its head on the beach of Great Courland Bay just south of the village. This cock would represent the spirit of old soldiers who were killed and buried with treasure which it is guarding.

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