

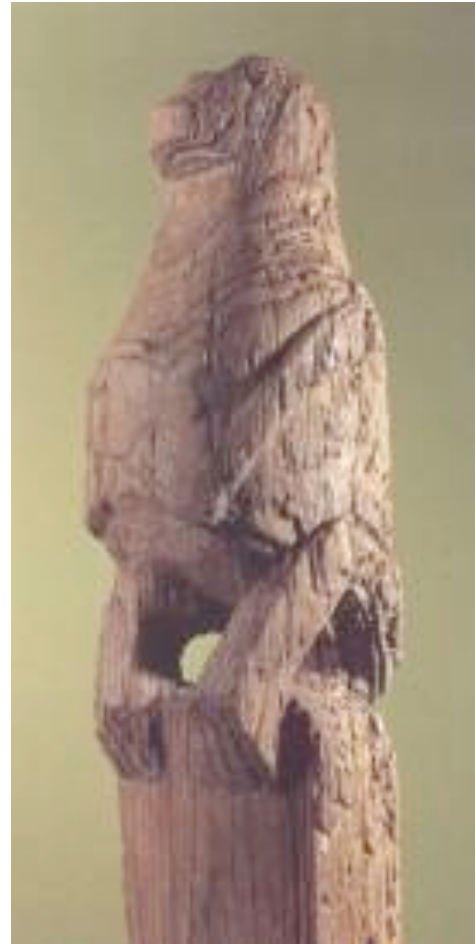
## Tomokan Waterworld<sup>1</sup>

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Walter van Tilburg Clark tells a marvelous story of the wild west, entitled “Indian Well,” about a trickle of water in a desert wall. The first half of his tale describes all the local critters as they make their way to the water at various intervals and with hierarchies of respect for the predators in the neighborhood. Finally, almost as an afterthought to the narrator, a prospector arrives with his lone burro named Jenny. What happens to him and his companion I’ll keep secret, for your enjoyment, but the overwhelming force of the story is that necessity makes this remote well into a community of earthkind with only one human.

The community of the land begins for me with water, even in a land with an annual rainfall of sixty inches. If Florida were a desert (once again) and Wekiva its only well, you would see quite clearly how vital to all the animals and plants it is. But most of what makes up a community, cultural or biological, is not immediately apparent. We live always at such a distance from our sources of survival that it is difficult to see what keeps us together.

For the Tomokan natives living on the Upper Wekiva long before Columbus set sail, the river was their only highway. Their canoes made of burnt-out pine or cypress logs could move quietly through the entire St. John's River Water Management District. Tomokan sites have been charted throughout most of the northeastern quarter of the state and into Georgia, four hundred miles and hundreds of shell-mounds, from the swamps off the coast at Brevard and dozens of major springs like Wekiwa and DeLeon, all the way to the beaches at Jacksonville and up



**Timucuan Otter: wood carving**

**From *Indian Art of Ancient Florida*,  
by permission of Barbara A. Purdy  
and University Press of Florida,  
photograph by Roy A. Craven**

<sup>1</sup> As a teen growing up in Daytona, we frequented the Tomoka River and its state park, so for this essay I prefer that spelling and pronunciation to what historians and scientists now use, Timucuan.

into Georgia. The Tomokans were primarily river people, subsisting largely on an aquatic diet, but gathering plants and hunting the animals of the river basin as well. A visit to Turtle Mound at the Canaveral Seashore will show how many of them lived along the coast as well. But it is their rivergreen habitat that the State of Florida is now seeking to preserve in good order for centuries to come.

In the northern part of the St. Johns and over toward the Aucilla River, after nearly two thousand years of hunter-gatherer inhabitation, the Tomokans had developed some agriculture of corn and squash. They had the beginnings of an organized society, shortly before the invasion of the conquistadors; however, in the marginal territory of the Wekiva River and its thirty archaeological sites, some scholars imagine that Mayacans, not speakers of Timucuan, occupied the river during the mission period of the Spaniards (1520-1670). Perhaps the tribe inhabiting the river was speaking the Acuero dialect and moving back and forth between lake Apopka and the Oklawaha tributary to the St. Johns.

We don't have the kind of cultural texts from the inhabitation of Tomokans we would like. We have no stories or rituals that might give us clues to what they knew and what they imagined. Oh, what I would give for even one creation account. What questions did they they ask when they stood on the edge of the fissure at Wekiwa that seems to begin their mysterious highway. Did some brave ones, as even now, try to go down into the cave, nosing quickly into the mere's utter darkness and then flushing out as quickly into the light? Or was it all so sacred that entering the cave was forbidden? Did they have a story of a Fisher King with a holy grail?<sup>2</sup>

The Tomokan was the original Florida naturalist--not a scientist with a theory, but a participant and observer who would have seen/heard/tasted/smelled/touched this waterworld in many ways we no longer can or do. They hunted turtle and deer, fished bass and bream, feasted on mussel and snail, and gathered plants from the local sandhills, scrubs, hammocks, and riverine habitats.

In the larger settlements of the north there are a few large mounds which show a variety of modes of burial and associated rituals. The wet-site archaeology of Florida (digging in lakes and streams that used to be dry land) has uncovered many interesting woodcarvings and pottery designs to show the depth of the spiritual force of the animals of the place: owl, turtle, pelican, vulture, bear, and otter. While none of these finds are exactly gathered in one place or dramatically represented in totem poles, the overall effect of the art of the Tomokans is impressive in Barbara A. Purdy's excellent book, *Indian Art of Ancient Florida*.

The Tomokan language is anomalous in a number of ways and seems to lack derivation from its immediate neighbors. Julian Granberry speculates that it might have

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<sup>2</sup> For excellent contemporary fiction of Tomokan life, see the award-winning novels by Fredric M. Hitt, *Wekiva Winter*, *Beyond the River of the Sun*, and *The Last of the Timucuan*.

been creolized from contact with the Warao language of the Orinoco River valley in South America. One of the major oddities of the language is a complete lack of tenses in the verbs. Did they lack as well our concept of history? Who can say?

Our knowledge of their language comes from several dual language texts in the Mocama dialect from the Spanish period of the *doctrinas*, when first Jesuit and then Franciscan missionaries tried to bring Tomokan natives into history via Christianity and the Castillian language. So it is a strange dictionary we are able to reconstruct which contains mostly the words one would need to impart the lessons of baptism and repentance. Their words for spider, otter, spring, and hawk are missing just as much as the speakers themselves. The last living speakers of Tomokan were shipped to Havana in the eighteenth century where the culture died out.

I am most interested in their thesaurus of terms for the ecology of their river places. As I mentioned before, in the Mocama dialect the same root word *ibi* is used for almost everything we would now identify as belonging to the water cycle: liquid, lake, pond, lagoon, river, stream, canal, ocean, sea, rain, tear, wave, dew, and rainbow, all rendered by *ibi*. Likewise, as a verb, this same waterword means to wash, bathe, drink, anoint, and menstruate. What an ecology of mind is working here. Even wine is designated by *ibi*, a substance the Spanish must have introduced to them, but I find it interesting that the Tomokans did not adopt the Spanish root nor invent a new word for it. *Ibi* was versatile enough. Small problem, then, to explain to the Tomokans the mystery of the Mass in the transubstantiation of wine into blood. They seem to comprehend fully the identity of the river in their own body fluids.

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In the 1970's when I returned to Florida to teach, I met a couple of student friends who lived on an island in the upper river. They motored up to the Marina from below Shell Island and drove to school in an old jalopy. They were part of the squatter population that fought to save their primitive dwellings--hammered pieces of sheet metal and discarded lumber--from the state's regulation of the river we shall see in the next chapter. Like Tomokans, they ate turtle and bass from the river, but stopped for hamburgers sometimes too on the way home. They experienced the river as their neighborhood and got the tradition of natural science from their Rollins "tribe." As I recall, however, their knowledge of the river was much better than the science they had from books and labs.

An inhabitant has the habits of the river; the rest of us take the river from a faucet, a sprinkler, and a hose. The distance there in terms of ecology can be substantial.

So, I try to write with my paddle and my feet. I think mostly with my senses. I am largely an earth-swimmer, Wekiva my reef, these words only my footprints. You have to go there often to experience the spectacle of the real Florida created by the Ocala rift and the millions-of-years-old database of Atlantic and Appalachian bone-folk. Then you can pretty much always hear the wavelets, the barred owl calls, the squeaking of coots at dusk, the zinging of skeeters, the delicious mourning of doves, and the swerves of bats and birds who catch the other waterwingers

I love to taste the water of Wekiva, before it is bottled or chlorinated; you can tell that it is cleansed by the bone-stone of our ancestors, Tomokan and before, all the vertebrates and invertebrates before us, upon which we build our community. The Song of Wekiva would make us all Tomokans. Though no one now speaks their language, we have faint traces of their chemistry among our genetic waters. Come listen with me to the silence of the mounds.