

A TALE OF DIVERSITY

CONVERSATIONS IN CROYDON



RHODA BHARATH

Lecturer,
Faculty of Humanities
and Education,
UWI, St Augustine Campus,
Trinidad

Six years ago on a street in Croydon, South London, I spent a pleasant afternoon in a shop that sells electronics and unlocks cell phones talking to a Sikh and his sons. The Sikh was the owner of the shop, his sons the managers. I had dropped off an item to be repaired; and part of the repair process required me leaving my name and phone number on the repair item. When I'd first entered the shop I only met the sons. Polite young men, very willing to help someone who was clearly a visitor to their country. When I returned an hour later to collect my package the eldest son asked me to hold on, then he brought out an elderly gentleman, obviously his father from the resemblance. His dad wore the turban that identified him as a Sikh, in accented English he pointed to the slip of paper I had left my information on and asked, "This is your name?" I smiled because I knew immediately where the conversation would lead to. I nodded, and he motioned me to a corner of the shop with chairs and offered me a cup of tea. My first question to him was, "You ever heard about Indenture?" Thus began a two hour story about the diversity of Trinidad and Tobago.

Diversity is a word that can be used to describe almost every aspect of Trinidad and Tobago. This twin island republic is home to features that are both old world and new, as well as continental and island. Our very topography helps to define our diversity, with Trinidad being a continental island with much in common with mainland South America; whilst Tobago, made more so from limestone coral shares more in common physically with the rest of the Caribbean archipelago. The diversity of the islands' topography of course has implications for flora and fauna. But the diversity I am most interested in is of course culture.

From Pre-Columbian times both islands had diverse populations with varying traditions and practices. Trinidad because of its geographic

proximity to South America has long been a hub and transshipment point between the mainland and the wider archipelago. As a result the settlement patterns of the island's Amerindian population reveal that it wasn't as simple as two ethnic groups settling here: namely Caribs and Arawaks. Rather, there were several Amerindian civilisations at various stages of development, which of course means complex cultural systems. Complex cultural systems would continue to be a norm for both islands in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

Though Europe made contact with both islands in 1498, their eventual colonisation and development happened at different times and at different rates. Throughout much of the 16th and 17th centuries when Trinidad was a colonial backwater, Tobago was coping with European powers fighting over her. It was only from 1783, with the Cedula of Population between France and Spain that Trinidad's development as a colony really took off. The introduction of indentured labour in the mid-19th century to bolster the changing labour systems after Emancipation also had a distinct impact on the culture of Trinidad. Inter-island immigration also played a role in further diversifying the population and culture of the islands. As a result of these different colonial histories the two islands have very distinct cultures. Tobago has a strong Protestant background due to its strong Dutch and English heritage, whereas, Trinidad, despite eventually belonging to Britain from 1797, still has a strong Roman Catholic influence that is very much evident on the island.

Colonialism exists in the meeting and domination of people and cultures and as a result the country is a multi-ethnic and diverse one. While, as with any other mixed space there are tensions, the mixing and synergising of cultures are evident in much of our material cultures, notably music, language and food.

The musical forms that exist in Trinidad and

Tobago are varied and many, from the Anglo-Afro-infused styles of Tobago's Tambrin, the Spanish influenced Parang, the Euro-Afro mixture of the Calypso, the East Indian-based folk songs called Chutney and the Soca that has incorporated influences from Europe, Africa, India and even the United States. The music of Trinidad and Tobago is as fluid as the personalities of its people.

The Trinidad English Creole, documented by Lise Winer, and the Tobagonian English Creole, written about by Valerie Youssef and Winford James are two examples of how dynamic and distinct the languages of the two islands are. Tobago's creole has strong West and Central African syntactical structures tempered by English influences, while Trinidad's creole has evolved from an Afro-Euro French patois that

has been gradually converted to English that is heavily flavoured with Arabic, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu and Yoruba words.

If the local forms of English don't yet have you exhausted, the array of cuisine will. Trinidad and Tobago boasts a cuisine that is as diverse as its heritage. From Tobago there are traditional dishes that are heavily African-influenced like tom tom (pounded plantain) and konkonte (cassava foo foo). This doesn't mean that you won't find Asian and Arabic food on the island. Trinidad, however, hands down boasts a much wider assortment of foods.

On that afternoon in Croydon, I recounted this, and much more, the many festivals that are celebrated here, for one thing. But Trinidad and Tobago is too complex a place to explain over one cup of tea. ■

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Photograph by Stephen Broadbridge

Trinidad and Tobago: a land of many colours