

# ISLE OF IMMIGRANTS - CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION

UNITY IN DIVERSITY, BY FATHER ANTHONY DE VERTEUIL, CSSP

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Trinidad is an island-state 15 miles off the north-east coast of South America, with continental characteristics, its flora and fauna being continental. Its first inhabitants, the Amerindians, migrated from the nearby mainland. In the succeeding years and centuries they were followed by a succession of immigrants from other continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, and, as might have been expected, each new wave of immigrants found themselves in confrontation with the former settlers.

The few Spaniards who settled in the island from 1592 onwards, forcibly subdued the Amerindians, then had them working in *encomiendas* before settling them in the milder missions, managed by Franciscan priests. But the easy-going Amerindian culture and the hammock and the *ajoupa* enchanted the Spanish psyche.

From 1778 to 1790 the King of Spain issued proclamations (*Cedulas*) aimed at the development of forested Trinidad, granting lands and very favourable trading terms to white Catholics (and to some extent free coloured) who were citizens of nations at peace with Spain. In practice, these new immigrants were mainly from the French West Indian islands (and a few Irish settlers) who brought with them their negro slaves. In just a few years the once almost uninhabited island had thriving estates of cotton, coffee, cocoa and sugar.

There was, at first, opposition to the new settlers from the few Spanish colonists, but this was speedily settled by the remarkable Spanish Governor of the island (from 1784-1797) Don José María Chacón. He also entrusted a coloured estate owner, de la Forrest, with the formulation of a lenient slave code for the many slaves being imported to develop the estates. Though there was some dichotomy between law and practice, it meant that in Trinidad there was established a tradition of more benevolent relations between master and slave than existed in other West Indian islands.

The numerous French settlers and French-patois-speaking slaves brought to Trinidad a colonial French culture: *“Mere numbers apart, it is not too much to say that the style and tone of the society was and remained, predominantly French ... French wines were drunk, French food eaten, French dress worn. At public balls French waltzes, minuets and country dances were all the rage.”*

The slaves and free coloured spoke a French patois, flavoured with colourful proverbs and folk law. The new place names in the island were nearly all French. Carnival, an import from Martinique and the French islands, where the French carnival from Nice had become inextricably mixed with African rhythms and traditions while acquiring a special Antillean flavour, in Trinidad was adopted and further adapted to become a truly Trinidadian institution.

Photograph: Paria Archive



A young English boy, approx. 1900s, from the collection of the Stone Family

Then, in February 1797, a British force led by General Abercromby captured Trinidad from the Spanish, and in 1802 the island was formally and finally handed over to British rule by the Treaty of Amiens. British merchants and capital helped to open up the island's trade. A few Italians, Corsicans and Germans also set up shop in the island. Along with the long resident French they were classified by the newly arrived British as 'Aliens' and religious differences also came more and more to the fore. With the emancipation of the slaves in 1838 and the foreclosing of mortgages, most French creoles and free coloured estate owners were ruined, and their estates went for a song to British capitalists.

In 1840 the Anglican Church became the Established Church in Trinidad, and the paramount influence of Charles William Warner (Attorney-General from 1844-1870) saw English law imposed on the Colony and Anglicisation in education introduced. The French creoles, almost 100 per cent Catholic, strongly opposed the British 'takeover' of the island. Up to 1870 there was intermittent confrontation between the groups, based almost entirely on religious differences but after that date cooperation gradually took root.

From this earlier period there remain up to today the places of worship of the various Christian denominations built at great sacrifice by their adherents, with occasional help by the government: the Church of St Joseph (in the old Spanish capital of St Joseph), and in Port of Spain, the Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Trinity Cathedral and the Church of All Saints (Anglican), Hanover Street Chapel (Methodist), Greyfriars and St Anns Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), St John's Baptist (Baptist).

Education was embraced by these various Christian denominations from the 1840s, beginning with primary schools which operated parallel to the government schools. The Catholics,

the Anglicans and the Presbyterians by 1900 had all numerous primary schools. The Catholics were the first to launch into secondary education, with the foundation of St Joseph's Convent for girls in 1836 and St George's College for boys in 1840, which gave way to St Mary's College in 1863. From 1870 the government was favourable to the giving of assistance to these schools and the system of Denominational schools working hand in hand with the government grew, in spite of many a crisis, into the present system.

The coming of the East Indian Immigrants from 1845 onwards (and a few Chinese) introduced a new equation into the religious, cultural and social milieu of Trinidad. Many difficulties had to be overcome but eventually there was cooperation in every sphere including the eventual foundation of the IRO (Inter Religious Organisation) to embrace the various religious bodies. ■

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Photograph: Paria Archive

Little girl dressed in the Martiniquan style, approx. 1880s. From a souvenir album that a traveller would have bought of faces and places of their sojourn