

# TOBAGO: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PORTRAIT

## TRAVELS THROUGH TIME



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There are several ways to measure development, but life expectancy is perhaps the most basic. By this measure, the tiny island of Tobago compares to the world's most developed nations. Whereas the world average is 67 years, the average Tobagonian can expect a full nine years more of life. And Tobagonian women have a life expectancy of almost 80 years, which is just one year below Japan, which has the highest average life expectancy in the world.

What accounts for this? Is it diet? Health care? Social equity? The data are insufficient to answer these questions. Strange as it may seem, it doesn't appear to be a matter of health – over 20 per cent of Tobagonians suffer from some chronic illness, which is the same as the national average. And more than one-third of Tobagonians smoke cigarettes, while about one in five have used marijuana or other soft drugs. Advances in medicine which have increased life expectancy world-wide in the past 50 years and, despite having no proper general hospital until 2012, healthcare in Tobago has kept pace with medical developments. In 1960, the island was served by 10 health centres which treated about 4,000 patients a year; in 2012, Tobago has 17 health centres and 5 outreach facilities which treat about 15,000 patients annually. This is with an increase in the population from just over 33,000 in 1960 to almost 57,000 today. Thus, the ratio of health facilities to population has risen from 1:3,300 to 1:2,600, while the ratio of centres to patients has decreased from 1:400 to 1:700. Put another way, whereas only 12 per cent of the population accessed professional health care 50 years ago, now 26 per cent do.

The Central Statistical Office's recently published *Trinidad and Tobago Human Development Atlas* revealed some other significant factors. For example, in terms of "multi-dimensional poverty" (measured not only by income, but also

by education, sanitation, electricity, and so on) Tobago had a very low ratio of poor persons. This is significant, since stress is a key factor in health and longevity and, as argued by epidemiologist Michael Marmot in his book *Status Syndrome*, stress exists along a social gradient – for example, the greater the gap between the haves and have-nots, the more stress experienced by the latter and therefore more ill-health.

Social disorder is also a major cause of stress, and crime is a key indicator of such disorder. In this regard, Tobagonians appear to be much better off than the rest of the country. In a 2010 survey funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Tobagonians were asked how worried they were about being a victim of crime. One in three persons worried about this, while just one in five found crime to be a problem in Tobago.

Tobagonians also seem to have confidence in the future since, according to a 2011 survey carried out by the ANSA McAL Psychological Research Centre, about 44 per cent of Tobagonians stated that they would like to have three or more children, even though the national average is 1.7, which is below the replacement rate needed to keep the population from declining. Between 2000 and 2011, the population of Tobago grew by almost three thousand persons, but how much of this increase is due to births and how much to immigration is not known.

Using religion as a measure of social change, Tobago's profile has altered significantly over the past 50 years. In the 1970 census, 48 per cent of Tobagonians were Anglican. In the 2000 census, only 18 per cent were. In 1970, the next largest religions in Tobago were Methodists, Roman Catholics, and Adventists, who each accounted for about 10 per cent of religious groups. In 2000, Baptists and Pentecostals had grown significantly, the former accounting for nearly 14 per cent of religious groups. In

1960, the Other/Not Stated group made up just 11 per cent of Tobago's population; in 2000, this group had grown to 22 per cent. In *The Changing Society of Tobago*, sociologist Susan Craig-James writes, "The religious composition of the population became more varied, partly because of increasing ethnic differentiation, and partly because of the growth of new evangelical Christian churches and of groups practising African-derived religions. However, the census data after 1970 fail to reflect these changes. Moravians, a major influential denomination in Tobago, were not identified; neither were Spiritual Baptists, Rastafari, Orishas, and Buddhists."

At the same time, changes in religion ratios do not necessarily mean changes in values, since different religions may adhere to the same norms even if they have different beliefs. In this regard, Tobago displays most of the traits of a traditional culture. For example, in the norms and values survey, 80 per cent disagreed with the statement "I rather live with a partner than get married"; 32 per cent had often received corporal punishment from their parents with another 58 per cent being hit "sometimes"; and 86 per cent did not support equal rights for homosexuals.

These are all attitudes which are prevalent in traditional cultures; in developed societies, most people hold opposite views. On the other hand, Tobago does have some modern values: for example, 82 per cent of Tobagonians think career and educational attainment should be pursued before marriage. Additionally, fertility rates have dropped in the island, suggesting that the stated preference for large families is not matched by the revealed preference of actual births. At present, the crude birth rate is 14 per 1,000 persons, down from 30 per 1,000 in the 1960s.

Another important socialisation factor is education, but this appears to have caused little fundamental change in Tobago in the

past half-century. In the 1960s, the island had 36 primary schools (10 government, 26 denominational) and four secondary schools (two government, one denominational, and five private) which served 1,400 students. Fifty years after Independence, the number of primary schools has increased to 41, with government schools catering for just 35 per cent of students. The number of secondary schools in Tobago has increased during the Independence era to nine, with six government schools, two denominational, and one private. Student enrolment is now over 4,000, with government schools accommodating over 70 per cent of them. However, although Tobago boasts a 100 per cent primary school enrolment rate, only 56 per cent of Tobagonians have a secondary level education in the 21st century. Specifically, only 27 per cent of persons over 50 have a secondary education, according to the Norms and Values survey, while 83 per cent of persons in the 17 to 30 year old age group do.

One likely reason for this low level is that, historically, Tobagonians didn't need a higher education in order to earn a living. In 1946, 37 per cent of Tobagonians were self-employed in farming, shop-keeping, trade and huckstering, according to figures compiled by Craig-James, and just 61 per cent were wage earners. Now, nearly half of the island's labour force is employed directly and otherwise by the State, meaning the Tobago House of Assembly, while just 40 per cent work in the private sector, or have their own business.

In this narrow sense, 50 years of Independence has brought less independence for Tobagonians, although the high rate of government employment may also be a key factor in Tobagonians' sense of security. Overall, the population now has a better standard of living than their forebears, but education levels and social attitudes reflect a present still harking back to the island's past. ■

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