

Writing the Caribs Out: The Construction and Demystification of the 'Deserted Island' Thesis for Trinidad

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Abstract:

One of the tenets of the modern historiography of Trinidad is that its former aboriginal inhabitants were practically extinct by the middle of the nineteenth century and that even prior to that Trinidad was virtually a deserted island. As a consequence, Trinidad's modern cultural development could then be cast as suffering from a dearth of indigeneity. I argue that what is essentially a *terra nullius* principle is the constructed result of racialized assumptions and naming practices embedded in colonial policy and historical literature of the late 1700s to early 1800s. The enforced silences on Amerindians of many historical sources that now form part of the canon of Trinidadian historiography present a problem of absence, contradicted by ethnographic realities of indigenous presence. Amerindians were increasingly racialized and labeled in a manner that would permit writers to eventually erase them from the historical register. Depictions of the irredeemable savage, romantic primitivist nostalgia, and what I call 'pathetic primitivism' mark the writings of the period in question. In the latter case, Amerindians were defined as dwindling in numbers (according to notions of racial purity), and were depicted as child-like, untrue to their heritage, ignorant of their culture, spiritually broken, and lifeless in character. The political economy of this region of the Atlantic world is critical for understanding the interests at work behind the production of these various narratives and images of the Amerindians in Trinidad, ranging from European colonial questions of "Who are the Indians?" to "Where are the Indians?"

Intra-European contests for hegemony that were played out in the Caribbean in the period spanning 1492 to the 1820s not only entailed severe consequences for the continued survival and adaptation of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean archipelago, these contests directly informed European colonizers' ascriptions of ethnic labels to Caribbean aboriginals. Ways of assigning and contesting identities subsequently conditioned interpretations of the very survival and adaptation of Amerindians. Shifts in colonial political economy served as an impetus for characterizing the existence of Amerindians in Trinidad. More often than not, European

ascriptions were not substantiated by ethnographic realities on the ground, but were seemingly deployed for ideological convenience, amended when expedient, rigidly enforced when upheld as true.

In the case of Trinidad, European struggles for hegemonic control over the wider Caribbean region led to Europeans asking not only “who are the Indians of Trinidad” but also to eventually ask “does Trinidad have *any* Indians”. These debates were inscribed in texts that have since been treated by scholars, writers and even indigenous activists as founts of canonical authority and thereby continue to exercise a presence. In the case of Trinidad, some of the results of this textual influence have been to either motivate a questioning of the “true identity” of Trinidad’s contemporary indigenous descendants, or, worse yet, to deny that they even are of indigenous ancestry. At work in the background of these discussions is the unresolved clash between colonial political economy and indigenous cultural realities and the clash between European literary and indigenous oral sources. One of my observations is that scholars and others have been more prepared to question the ‘authenticity’ and ‘legitimacy’ of contemporary Caribs in Trinidad than to question texts written about the Caribs by others (and largely written against the Caribs). While providing an overview of the identity/hegemony contests of the early colonial period, I will then focus especially on the period lasting from the cessation of Spanish enslavement of the Caribs in 1756 until the proclaimed extinction of the latter by the late 1800s in Trinidad. The problem at the focus of this study is the ongoing influence of colonial narratives in conditioning our ability to even perceive Amerindian survival and adaptation, which tend to reduce cultural change to cultural loss, and miscegenation to extinction.

The Problem of Presence, from the Present to the Past

One of the tenets of the modern historiography of Trinidad is that its former aboriginal inhabitants were practically extinct by the middle of the nineteenth century and that even prior to that Trinidad was virtually a deserted island. Anthropologists have written that Trinidad “remained largely a deserted island until the last years of Spanish colonial rule, when in 1783 French planters and their slaves came and set up plantations based on slave labor”.¹ As Yelvington further notes: “social historians have investigated how the aboriginal population was virtually wiped out after contact with Spanish explorers who came after Columbus’s voyage in 1498”.² Yelvington is correct in his observations of the mainstream literature on Trinidadian history. Indeed, support for this argument has been forthcoming from the influential works of contemporary historians such as Bridget Brereton in Trinidad, who argued:

The modern history of Trinidad began in the 1780s, when the Spanish Government opened the island to settlement by French planters and their slaves. In the nearly three centuries following its discovery, Trinidad was a remote, isolated, and undeveloped outpost of Spain’s vast American empire.³

In the 1970s, David Lowenthal’s influential history text noted that in the wider Caribbean today, “however defined, only about 50,000 Amerindians inhabit the West Indian culture realm, a small fraction of the one or two million living there at the time of Columbus”; moreover, in Lowenthal’s estimation, “the surviving remnants are dwindling, socially demoralized,

¹ Kevin A. Yelvington, *Producing Power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 42.

³ Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 7-8.

progressively less Indian in character”.⁴ Lowenthal points out that, by the end of the 18th century, sources claim that the Arawaks were all extinct and that the few remaining de-indigenized Caribs were in a state of cultural and ethnic deterioration.⁵ A text on Trinidad’s aboriginal history claimed that “few if any” indigenous inhabitants remain in Trinidad.⁶ Eradication and extermination are the key descriptors here. Contemporary Trinidadian historians also claim that by 1797 all of Trinidad’s Indian villages had virtually “disappeared”; moreover, isolated Indians who had not been brought under colonial control “must have been” an insignificant minority that also “disappeared”.⁷ As a consequence, Trinidad’s modern cultural development could then be cast as suffering from a dearth of indigeneity.⁸

While emphasizing extinction, there are minor exceptions within that same social scientific literature where there has been some mention of the “Caribs of Arima” and their annual Santa Rosa Festival⁹ and the “Carib Queen of Arima”.¹⁰ Much more mention of the Caribs of Arima exists in the works of non-academic writers, Trinidadian and international, on both general and very localized topics concerning the Caribbean.¹¹ Texts referring to Amerindians in the Mission of Arima, or after its demise, comprise colonial reports, the writings of amateur historians, and the works of travel writers.¹² The last category of literature residing outside of the institutional social sciences that makes some mention (in varying degrees) of the Caribs of Arima or the Amerindians of Trinidad, consists of locally published texts in Trinidad, on various topics of Trinidadian history, culture and society.¹³

⁴ David Lowenthal, West Indian Societies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ Linda Newson, Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad (London: British Academic Press, 1976), 3.

⁷ Bridget Brereton, A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962 (London: Heinemann, 1981), 7, 16, 20, 21.

⁸ Michael Lieber, Street Life: Afro-American Culture in Urban Trinidad (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981), 1.

⁹ Donald Wood, Trinidad in Transition: The Years After Slavery (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 43-44.

¹⁰ Gordon K. Lewis, The Growth of the Modern West Indies (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 393.

¹¹ For example: Sir Harry Luke, Caribbean Circuit (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1950); John A. Bullbrook, The Ierian Race (Port of Spain: Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 1940); and, John A. Bullbrook, The Aborigines of Trinidad (Port of Spain: Royal Victoria Institute Museum, 1960).

¹² Pierre-Gustave-Louis Borde, The History of the Island of Trinidad under the Spanish Government, First Part (1498-1622) (Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie, Libraires-Editeurs, 1876), and The History of the Island of Trinidad under the Spanish Government, Second Part (1622-1797) (Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie, Libraires-Editeurs, 1883); William Hardin Burnley, Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842); Henry Nelson Coleridge, Six Months in the West Indies (London: John Murray, 1826); James Henry Collens, Centenary of Trinidad, 1797-1897 (Port of Spain: Government Printing Office, 1896); R. P. Marie-Bertrand Cothonay, O.P., Trinidad: Journal d’un Missionnaire Dominicain des Antilles Anglaises (Paris: Victor Retaux et Fils, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1893); L.A.A. De Verteuil, Trinidad: Its Geography, Natural Resources, Administration, Present Condition, and Prospects (London: Ward & Lock, 1858); Lionel Mordant Fraser, History of Trinidad (First Period), from 1781 to 1813, Vol. I (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1971 [1891]) and History of Trinidad (Second Period), from 1814 to 1839, Vol. II (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1971 [1896]); E.L. Joseph, History of Trinidad (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1970 [1838]); Charles Kingsley, At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies (London: Macmillan and Co., 1877); and K.S. Wise, Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. I (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 1934), Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. II (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 1936), Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. III (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 1938), and Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. IV (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 1938).

¹³ Michael Anthony, Towns and Villages of Trinidad and Tobago (St. James, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Circle Press, 1988); Fr. John Thomas Harricharan, The Catholic Church in Trinidad, 1498-1852, Vol. 1 (Port of

In summary, the Arima Caribs have either been featured in literature marginal to social science research on Trinidad, or, have appeared only momentarily in some of that research, again in varying degrees of acute marginality and usually positing their imminent disappearance.¹⁴ For the most part, the dominant view, across the array of social science research, is simply that the native population was basically liquidated. As for any surviving remnants, some historians have seen their role as one of disputing the ‘claimed’ identity of today’s Caribs, positing a different ‘actual’ ancestry. In this vein, Brereton wrote in her entry for Trinidad and Tobago in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “The original inhabitants of Trinidad were chiefly Arawak. Although there are inhabitants of the town of Arima who claim descent from Carib royalty, it is doubtful that the land was settled by Caribs”.

I argue that what is essentially a *terra nullius* principle is the constructed result of racialized assumptions and naming practices embedded in colonial policy and historical literature of the late 1700s to early 1800s. The enforced silences on Amerindians of many historical sources that now form part of the canon of Trinidadian historiography present a problem of absence, contradicted by ethnographic realities of indigenous presence. These historical sources—at least those that have been deployed narrowly and selectively—need to be contextualized in terms of cultural history and political economy, and, they need to be evaluated against other documentary materials of the time.

Cultural history affords us one basis for engaging in source criticism. By this I mean that we need to critically examine the way Amerindians were increasingly racialized and labeled in a manner that would permit writers to either erase them from the historical register, or, to minimize their demographic presence even whilst maximizing their symbolic value. Depictions of the irredeemable savage, romantic primitivist nostalgia, and what I call ‘pathetic primitivism’ mark the writings of the period in question. In the latter case, Amerindians were defined as dwindling in numbers (according to notions of racial purity), and were depicted as child-like, untrue to their heritage, ignorant of their culture, spiritually broken, and lifeless in character. What the dominant accounts neglect is the degree to which miscegenation (which released ‘impure’ offspring into the general population) and cultural creolization acted as media for Amerindian cultural and even communal survival, rather than cultural loss. Most accounts thus share in a colonial discourse of cultural purism. As a consequence of these observations I am therefore arguing that the alleged “virtual extinction” of Trinidad’s Amerindians is a discursive construction based on the invention of arbitrary concepts without a grounding in the actual demography, self-identification and cultural practices of Trinidad’s Amerindian descendants.

The political economy of this region of the Atlantic world is also critical for understanding the interests at work behind the arbitrary production of these various narratives and images of the Amerindians in Trinidad. I will finally bring attention to the relevant changes wrought by the Treaty of Amiens and the Spanish cession of Trinidad to the British in 1802 and how this impacted the mission status of Trinidad’s Amerindians. In particular, the shift from a sugar economy to a cocoa economy was a critical force that shaped discourses on the Amerindian absence-presence problem in Trinidad. In the process, I will highlight how the ‘deserted island thesis’ was used to justify the expropriation of Amerindian lands.

Spain: Inprint Caribbean Ltd., 1983); Vincent Leahy, *Catholic Church in Trinidad, 1797-1820* (Arima, Trinidad: St. Dominic Press, 1980); and, Robert C. Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad, From 1498-1797* (Diego Martin, Trinidad: C. R. Ottley, 1955).

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*, 19.

Who are the Indians of Trinidad? 1498-1600

Trinidad was first sighted and named on Columbus' third voyage in 1498. Spanish attempts to settle the island with colonists did not begin in earnest until 1592. By some estimates, the Amerindian population numbered 40,000 at the time of the first encounter.¹⁵ We can never be certain of this figure given a basic feature of Trinidad's geography: it is merely six miles from the South American mainland (see Figure 1), making it readily accessible to the comings and goings of many tribes on the nearby mainland. From the point of view of long-term cultural history, Trinidad, the oldest site of human habitation in the Caribbean,¹⁶ is more of a South American island. Indeed, a number of chroniclers and later historians acknowledged the presence of a multitude of tribes—speaking of as many as a dozen—all with provenance in the nearby territories of the Orinoco River Delta and the Guyanas.¹⁷ The earliest linguistic and tribal map of Trinidad would have been quite complex, a complexity severely reduced by European deployment of “Indian”, or “Carib” and “Arawak”, as the dominant labels.

Spanish entry into a complex local political situation had a considerable impact on the local state of affairs described by colonial chroniclers, “introducing another player, of obvious power if markedly ignorant, whose presence and actions had immediately to be factored into all native calculations, responses, and words”.¹⁸ That some groups would be classified as cannibal (Carib) in order to justify their legal conquest and thus displace them as competitors for local labor power, would also serve to facilitate alliances between the Spanish and Amerindian rivals of the so-called Caribs.

¹⁵ Antonio de Berrío writing in 1593, stated: “Having overrun the island and made the description of all the natives there, there are found some 7,000 souls, and so many Indians married that they would exceed 35,000 souls”. Quoted in Neil L. Whitehead, Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana, 1498-1820 (Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1988), fn. 35, 203.

¹⁶ Arie Boomert, “Our Amerindian Heritage”, Trinidad Naturalist 4 (4) (Jul-Aug 1982): 26.

¹⁷ A French Creole historian wrote that when first discovered by Columbus, “Trinidad was apparently well populated, being then inhabited by Yaos, Caribs, Chaymas, and other tribes of the Carib-Tamanaco family”, De Verteuil, Trinidad: Its Geography, 172. A French historian of Trinidad wrote that seven tribes occupied Trinidad, including the Aruacas, Chaimas, Tamanaques, Chaguanes, Salives, Quaquas, and Caraïbes (who were further divided into four “sub-tribes”: Nepoios, Yaïos, Carinepagatos, Cumanagotos): Borde, The History of the Island of Trinidad, 40). As Borde explained, “while the other islands of the Antilles, even the largest, were inhabited by only one or two, or at most, three Indian tribes, Trinidad had an agglomeration of the greater part of those found on the neighbouring continent”, *Ibid.*, 39. However, even while highlighting this diversity, Borde himself posits Carib dominance: “Carib was the dominant language in the country....the Aruaca, Chaima, Salive, Quaqua experienced no difficulty in adding to the knowledge of the language of his childhood, that of the common [Carib] language of the country”: *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸ Hulme, “Making Sense of the Native Caribbean,” 11.



Figure 1: Map of Trinidad

Historical processes of political economy and identity construction have been central to framing the figure of the Carib in particular ways and at particular times, for a variety of purposes. In this section I will outline some of the important interpretative and historical research of Neil Whitehead and Peter Hulme and then apply some of their observations to specific materials relating to Trinidad.

‘Carib’, as a classificatory category, emerged from the confrontation between Europe and the aboriginal Caribbean, and was the first attempt at some measure of ethnic specification after the initial deployment of the generic term *indio* (Indian). Carib was a pejorative native term that was not used as an auto-denomination by any group at the time of the first European incursions—all we know is that there is no record of any native ethnic self-ascription in the Caribbean at the time of contact.¹⁹ ‘Arawak’ itself was a word “never used by any Caribbean Amerindians” as an ethnic self-ascription, indeed, “neither Arawak nor Taíno were ever, as far as we know, self-ascriptions”.²⁰ The Carib idea emerged from a developing discourse that was an attempt to “manage Europe’s understanding of its colonial relationships with Native Caribbean societies”.²¹ The earliest writings by Columbus and his contemporaries, in the 1492-1498 period, attest to an uncertain probing, with multiple questions of designating language, place, or customs in connection with native identities, endless mistranslations and doubts, and constant redefinition and improvisation. As James Axtell summarizes, Europeans saw Indians “through a glass darkly; at worst, they never saw them at all but only tawny reflections of their own self-projections and neuroses, as in a mirror”, and that in any event, “the Europeans’ ‘ethnocentrism’, their monolithic concept of ‘savagism’, whether noble or ignoble, so clouded their vision that the

¹⁹ Peter Hulme, “Making Sense of the Native Caribbean,” *New West Indian Guide* 67(1993): 200, and *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Routledge, 1992), 57.

²⁰ Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 59, 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.

human and cultural reality of native life was almost never recognized and less seldom acknowledged”.²²

On the other hand, the European narrative of the Carib soon became a reality ‘on the ground’ within the Caribbean, when conflict and cooperation between Europeans and natives opened the door to native adoption of the labels used by Europeans. With respect to this seminal construction of the Carib label, Hulme challenges us to question “the frequently-made assumption that new human groupings first come into being—and are then categorized”, noting that, “the Caribs may in some sense themselves have been a ‘new people’, created in the context of the sixteenth-century Caribbean”.²³

‘Carib’, a former cognate of ‘cannibal’, had, at best, indeterminate ethnographic substance; it was primarily a political label, often with real economic consequences. Applications of the label were flexible and open to manipulation. Interests were vested in the labeling process. To mark persons as ‘Carib’ meant that under decrees issued by the Crown, aboriginals could be legally enslaved. However, it was not always wise or useful to enslave aboriginals. Thus persons once marked as ‘Carib’ could subsequently be classified as ‘Arawak’ to encourage alliances with the Spanish and/or maintain an aboriginal workforce *in situ*. As Hulme explains, “Spain’s self-appointed task...was to identify and replace the Caribs as the dominant power in the region”.²⁴ For the Spanish, allies were Arawak, enemies were Carib.²⁵ As Samuel Wilson adds, ‘Taínos’ used ‘Carib’ in name-calling; Europeans used ‘Carib’ to simplify the political map, and ‘Carib’ was economically expedient since Caribs could be enslaved.²⁶

²² James Axtell, After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 126.

²³ Peter Hulme, “Yellow and Black in the Caribbean: Racial and Ethnic Classification on St Vincent During the Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s” (Paper presented at a seminar in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, March 2000), 2, 9.

²⁴ Hulme, “Making Sense”, 213.

²⁵ Lee Drummond, “On Being Carib” in Carib-Speaking Indians: Culture, Society and Language, ed. Ellen B. Basso (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 78.

²⁶ Samuel M. Wilson, “The Taíno Social and Political Order”, in Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, eds. Fatima Brecht et al. (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., El Museo del Barrio, 1997). For more on the Carib versus Arawak/Taíno dichotomy, see Hulme, “Making Sense”, 199, 202-203; Miriam Jiménez Román, “The Indians are Coming! The Indians are Coming!: The Taíno and Puerto Rican Identity”, in Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1999), 82-83; Peter Roberts, “What’s in a Name, an Indian Name?” in Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1999), 60; and Jorge Duany, “Making Indians Out of Blacks: The Revitalization of Taíno Identity in Contemporary Puerto Rico”, in Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1999), 39. Statements made by key actors of the time, designate Amerindians in varying ways at different times. On his first voyage through the Caribbean, Christopher Columbus wrote of “an island which is Carib...which is inhabited by people who are regarded in all these islands as very ferocious, who eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India, rob and take whatever they can...wearing their hair long like a woman...use bows and arrows of the same cane stems...ferocious among these other people who are cowardly to an excessive degree”: Christopher Columbus, “The Letter of Columbus (1493)”, in Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day-An Anthology, eds. Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 14-15. Amérigo Vespucci, in a letter to Lorenzo de Medici, of 18 July, 1500, speaking of his landing in Trinidad, discussed Trinidad’s Amerindians: “We knew that they were of a people called cannibals and that most of them live on human flesh; and of this you can be certain Your Magnificence....Of this we were certain in many parts, where we met such people, because we immediately saw bones and skulls of some they had eaten, and they do not deny it; moreover their enemies, who are always afraid of them, also say so....These

If and when Trinidad's Amerindians were deemed to be 'real Caribs' was a question framed within the dominant concerns of colonial political economy.²⁷ In 1503, with the growing demand for slaves in Spanish occupied territories such as Hispaniola, Queen Isabella issued her edict authorizing the capture and enslavement of the 'Canibales', apparently swayed by accounts of anthropophagous savages actively propagated by slave traders such as Juan de la Cosa.²⁸ From the early 1500s, and especially from 1503 as mentioned above, the trade of Trinidad Amerindian slaves to Margarita and Cubagua to work in the pearl fisheries had begun, with numbers also sent to Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo.²⁹ This first phase of colonial political economy centred on slave trading and pearls.

Diego Columbus began a trade in Amerindian slaves, in 1509, from Trinidad to Margarita.³⁰ However, it was not then fully settled whether Trinidad's Amerindians were 'Carib' or not, given that, "in 1510 it was said that there were no peaceful Indians along the whole coast of the Tierra Firme, except in Trinidad".³¹ Indeed, a Royal Decree of 15 June 1510, addressed to Diego Columbus, ordered a stop to the Trinidad Amerindian slave trade.³² However, under pressure from the colonists of Santo Domingo for an increased labor force³³ on 23 December 1511, the King then issued a Real Cédula *re-legalizing* slavery.³⁴

Therefore, in 1510 Trinidad was not Carib; in 1511 it was Carib; and, by 1512, once more, Trinidad was not Carib. Orders to cease the enslavement of Trinidad's Amerindians "were

people we knew to be cannibals and that they ate human flesh": Amerigo Vespucci, "Por el Mar Caribe", in *Cronistas de las culturas precolombinas*, ed. Luis Nicolau D'Olwer (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963 [1500]), 43-44. Similarly, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés (a Spanish traveller who spent decades in the early colonial Caribbean and interviewed many of the leading Spanish conquerors) wrote that, "the island of Trinidad...is populated by Carib Indians bearing arrows.... They are a very bellicose people, naked and idolatrous, and they eat human flesh, and beneath these vices one must believe that they have many others": Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias, II* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1959), 387. Others instead described a very different picture, as did Bartolomé de Las Casas (the "Apostle of the Indies") in 1518: "In the island of Trinidad...the Indians are as good and kind as any to be found in all the Indies": quoted in Eric E. Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (London: André Deutsch, 1962), 24.

²⁷ Dave D. Davis and R. Christopher Goodwin, "Island Carib Origins: Evidence and Non-evidence", *American Antiquity* 55 (1990): 38.

²⁸ Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 70.

²⁹ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 132.

³⁰ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 2-3; Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. IV*, 7.

³¹ Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad*, 18.

³² "There are islands much nearer [to Hispaniola] from which they can be brought, and, moreover, as it is an island of some size and it is said to have gold and that it is at peace and that trade is carried on with the Indians for pearls, and, that by offending the Indians of the island [of Trinidad] we should lose the pearl trade because there are not at present any other Indians along the whole coast of Tierra Firme at peace, and, that, it is well to maintain peace in these islands, as the pearl trade is so profitable....Therefore I do order you that from now on you shall not allow nor permit anyone to take Indians from this said island [Trinidad], and, that these said Indians shall always be well treated and preserved": Decree quoted in Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 3.

³³ Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 11.

³⁴ "And I do hereby and I therefore give licence and permission to all those who are so ordered by me both in the island [and] in Tierra Firme of the Mar Oceana that up to now are discovered—in the future—that they may wage war against the Caribs of the island of Trinidad, of Vari, of Dornycina, of Concepcion, Martinico, Santa Lucia, San[...] Vicente, Barbados, Cubaco and Mayo, and also that these Carib Indians may be captured and taken to such ports and islands wheresoever, and that these Indians may be sold for profit without punishment or penalty for so doing, and, without paying any duty provided they are not taken or sold outside the Indies": Decree quoted in Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 4; see also Harricharan, *The Catholic Church in Trinidad, I*, 8.

repeated in 1512 to San Juan and the Royal Officials were urged to take immediate steps to verify the Indian reports of valuable gold deposits in Trinidad”.³⁵ The promulgation of the Ley de Burgos in 1512, stipulating the end to Indian slavery, also decreed that “Indians were to be paid just wages for their labor”.³⁶ Yet, as the search for gold proved unsuccessful, “interest in Trinidad thereupon lapsed except as a place for enslaving Indians to be sold at Cubagua and San Domingo”.³⁷

The need for some consistency in definitions became salient especially with the increasing outcry from members of the Dominican Order, such as Friar Bartolomé De Las Casas, and during the reforms of Cardinal Cisneros in Spain, “the distinction between ‘Carib’ and ‘non-Carib’ populations became a serious concern for the Spanish Crown, and, in 1518, Rodrigo de Figueroa was appointed a judge, with plenary powers, to produce a definitive classification of Amerindian cultures, throughout those territories known to the Spanish”.³⁸ Three centuries later, the traveler/explorer Alexander von Humboldt wrote of Figueroa and his report:

His ethnographic piece, called El auto de Figueroa, is one of the most curious records of the early conquistadores’ barbarism. Without paying attention to languages, any tribe that was accused of eating prisoners was called Carib. All the tribes that Figueroa called Carib were condemned to slavery.³⁹

Following the protests by Las Casas, Trinidad was excluded from Figueroa’s classification of 1518, “though...as in the meantime gold had been reported from the island, the change in the status of Trinidad’s Amerindians might be seen as reflecting a desire to preserve a native labour force, *in situ*, for use in future mining operations”.⁴⁰ Though Trinidad was thus declared an island not occupied by Caribs, this situation seemed in doubt as slave traders once again petitioned the Crown for permission to enslave Indians on the basis of their being evil, warlike cannibals.⁴¹ In a pattern that should be familiar to the reader by now, “when the gold failed to materialize and Antonio Sedeño was given permission to colonize the island in 1530, Trinidad was, once again, declared ‘Carib’, by a *Real Cédula* of the 13th of September of that year”.⁴² In addition, the strategic value of Trinidad was increased in this period by Spanish attempts to penetrate the Orinoco region in search of the mythical land of Meta (the province of the famed El Dorado), making an unhindered occupation of Trinidad highly desirable.⁴³

While Trinidad itself was no longer considered a probable source of gold by 1600, it had a strategic and economic importance primarily in terms of its location as a base for searching for El Dorado; the cultivation and trade in tobacco, the first lucrative cash crop of the Caribbean; and, later, the export of cocoa, the second valuable agricultural commodity to be produced in the Caribbean.⁴⁴ The search for El Dorado from Trinidad and the production of tobacco both

³⁵ Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago*, Vol. III, 8.

³⁶ Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1996), 18.

³⁷ Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago*, Vol. III, 8-9.

³⁸ Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 9.

³⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (London: Penguin, 1995), 277.

⁴⁰ Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 11.

⁴¹ Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad*, 18-19.

⁴² Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Jesse A. Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela: Historia de la administración española de Trinidad* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1972), 13.

dominated the late 1500s-early 1600s period. Cocoa became prominent from 1670 to 1725. The Amerindians themselves maintained a significant hold on the tobacco trade even into the 1600s. Dutch, English and French vessels illegally traded manufactured goods for tobacco in Trinidad in the early years of the 1600s.⁴⁵

For approximately sixty years after the departure of Sedeño in 1534, Trinidad remained in the hands of the Indians, “who developed a fair trade in tobacco, corn, and other foodstuffs with the many adventurers who came to the West Indies in search of riches”.⁴⁶ The problem with this situation was that the Spanish were eager to appropriate Amerindian trade networks as another source of capital extraction in addition to more direct forms of accumulation; moreover, they were equally eager to secure these trade networks from themselves, to the exclusion of new contenders in the region such as the Dutch, the French and the British. More often than not, those identified as ‘Carib’ were those local polities that still controlled an independent trade in valuable commodities such as tobacco. Unsurprisingly, in 1547, “the King of Spain gave special permission to the inhabitants of San Juan to make war upon the Caribs and to enslave them.... The natives of Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Martinique (Matinino), Dominica, and Santa Cruz were specially aimed at. These islands appear to have always been the chief strongholds of the Caribs”.⁴⁷

As part of the attempt to restore Spanish control of the Orinoco, in competition with ‘intruding’ powers such as the Dutch and the British, in 1642 King Philip II of Spain ordered that the armed conquest cease and in a royal decree of that same year he initiated the mission system, given that military invasions had largely failed to subdue Amerindian groups.⁴⁸ In 1686 Trinidad’s Governor Zuñiga gave orders to abolish, “in the Province of Trinidad and Guayana, every sort of bondage contract of Indians, in order that they might enjoy their liberty”.⁴⁹ The Spanish turned instead to missionaries in securing Amerindian allies and co-opting Amerindian trade networks.

By the early 1700s, the Spanish sought to undercut and obstruct Carib trading patterns by first offering European goods apparently for nothing, thus reducing Carib influence amongst Amerindian peoples of the Orinoco.⁵⁰ With indigenous populations held in one place, access to them secured, and with men’s labor for the priests’ agricultural projects paid for in European goods, the mission system was thus designed to effectively undercut Carib dominance.⁵¹ The mission was also a political and military institution designed to “defend the outposts of empire from the encroachment of foreign powers and to extend them by opening up new lands” while turning ‘reduced’ and instructed Amerindians over to the state.⁵²

In order to summarize the apparent ebb and flow in Spanish designations of the same aboriginal population of Trinidad as enemies or friends, Caribs or Arawaks, depending on political economic interests and competition with other European powers, we can examine Figures 2 and 3. In a broad outline, Figure 2 outlines a select list of labels ascribed by the Spanish, sorted according to their valences, as perceived and written by Spanish explorers, ecclesiastical and military officials, and chroniclers cited throughout. The Amerindian

⁴⁵ Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago*, Vol. II, 17.

⁴⁶ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 9.

⁴⁷ Henry Hesketh Bell, *Report on the Caribs of Dominica*, Colonial Report No. 21—Dominica, 29 July 1902: 6.

⁴⁸ Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 131.

perspective is largely absent. The intention here is to present a map of the political economy of ethnic naming. The cyclicity shown is not synonymous with repetition, in that the specifics of each phase do not replicate those of a previous phase.

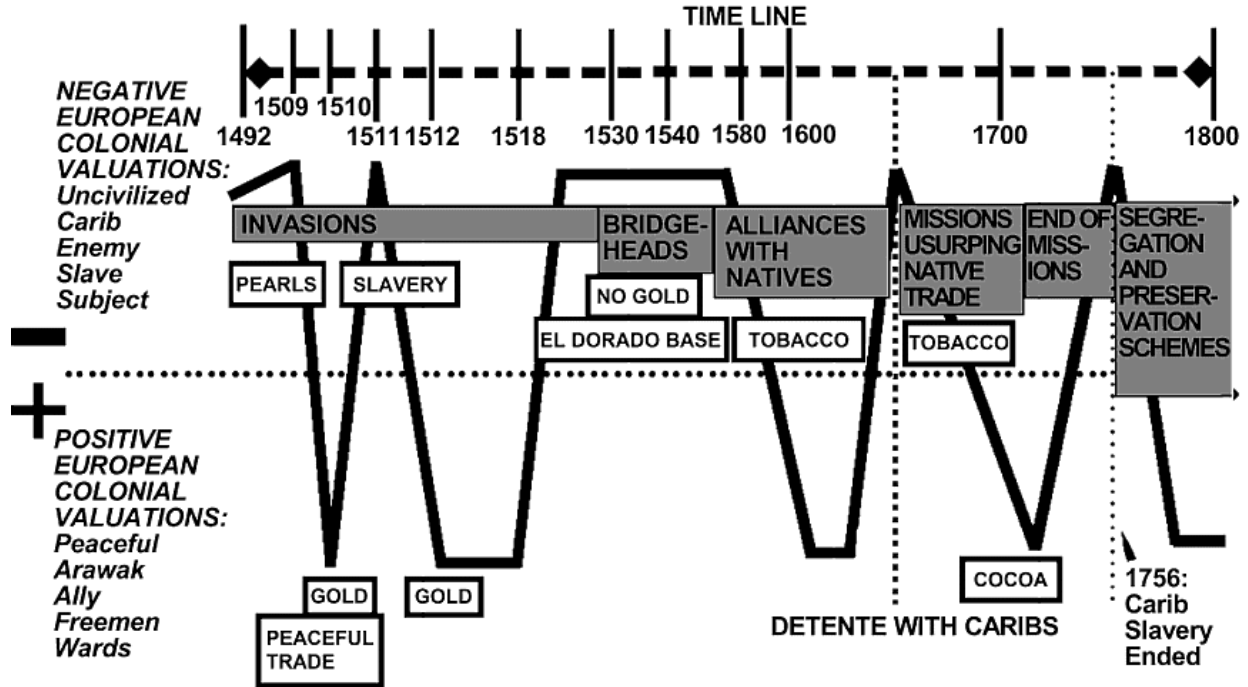


Figure 2: The Political Economy of Spanish Constructions of Aboriginal Identities

The shaded boxes, whose width is meant to represent duration, characterize the distinct phases of European entry into and eventual occupation of Trinidad. Commodities that were valued at given times are represented in the white boxes (without representing duration). The chart depicts the move from positive to negative colonial valuations from the moment a commodity is discovered that requires slave labor and/or another European contender has entered the scene.

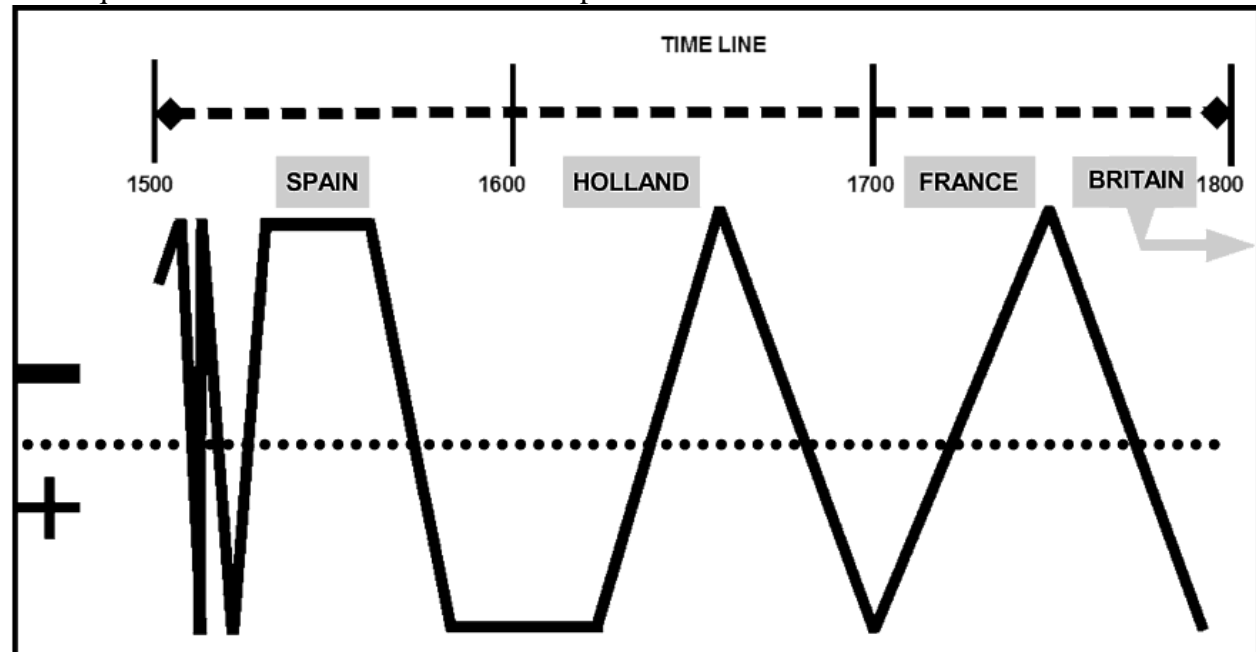


Figure 3: Geopolitics and Spanish Perceptions of Caribbean Aborigines

Figure 3 is a distillation of Figure 2, shorn of the labels and more evenly balanced in the graphic spread of the timeline. As a result, Figure 3 brings into bold relief the ways Spanish valuations changed as natives had access to alliances with competing European powers—often resorting to highlighting their savagery and treachery especially when seen as acting in concert with unscrupulous European rivals. This chart also demonstrates considerable early instability and rapid fluctuations, as supported by earlier discussions outlining European entry into a politically and ethnographically complex situation, seeking ways to gauge native responses and endeavoring to sort out potential allies and enemies. Eventually, we see a certain measure of stabilization emerging, with the ebb and flow appearing to be more or less regular. When local Amerindian groups became aligned or collaborated with rival European powers, Spanish ascriptions and valuations tended to stress their nature as savages. Whereas Figure 2 depicts a political economy of naming, Figure 3 highlights the geopolitical context of ethnic ascription. The chart thus approximates the long-waves and cycles of European hegemony regularly featured in the works of world-systems analysts.

Who are the Indians of Trinidad that are Our Friends? 1600-1756

The apparent aim of the Spanish colonists in Trinidad at the start of the 1600s was not to engage in total armed conquest of all the Amerindians in the area, rather, the interest was in gaining a foothold in the illicit tobacco trade with the English, Dutch and French, as well as maintaining a bridgehead into the Orinoco.⁵³ While tobacco continued to be important, cocoa became the leading (legal) export and the mainstay of the newly founded missions at mid century. As a result of the establishment of missions in Trinidad, the church became an economic magnate in the colony, controlling almost all available Amerindian labor. Even modern Trinidadian historians with a predisposition to favour the Catholic Church will admit, “the mission was organized almost on a commercial basis”.⁵⁴ All Indians in the missions were subject to the missionaries for a period of ten years, “during which time they worked free of charge in exchange for their board and the protection of their bodies”.⁵⁵ Noel instead argues that the period of indenture was 20 years.⁵⁶

However, as the Spanish were interlopers in Amerindian trade networks and impinged on Amerindian labor supplies, they also suffered constant attacks against their missions by Amerindians from the nearby mainland, most often the Warao.⁵⁷ The Mission Indians, for their part, were seen by the Warao and other Amerindian rivals of the Spanish, as “relations of the Spaniards”.⁵⁸ How were these allied groups classified by the Spanish? One early designation was simply that of “Christian Indian”.⁵⁹ In other cases, their allies were referred to as Aruacas

⁵³ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 15.

⁵⁴ Anthony De Verteuil, C. S. Sp., *Martyrs and Murderers: Trinidad, 1699* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: St. Mary’s College, 1995), 57.

⁵⁵ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 26.

⁵⁶ Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela*, 20.

⁵⁷ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 29.

⁵⁸ Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*, 117.

⁵⁹ Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural*, 391; Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description of the Indies (c. 1620)* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968), 87.

(Arawaks) even though in 1603 there had also been alliances with the Warao⁶⁰ who were dominant in the Orinoco and Trinidad.⁶¹

After all of the ideological labor invested by the Spanish in depicting Arawaks as weak, cowardly and docile people, one should then ask if having Arawak allies would offer any reassurance to those sponsoring colonial ventures in the region. Would the Crown not frown upon the poverty of such an alliance? This is where a rupture with the previous Carib versus Arawak dichotomy became mandatory, with the resultant transformation in the traits associated with the Arawaks.⁶² The Arawaks of 1620 were no longer defined as the Arawaks of 1492, at least not when it was necessary to forget the classifications of yesteryear.

Adding a further disjuncture, the Spanish also began to classify some Caribs as allies, especially when the ‘intrusion’ of the Warao added a fourth player. At this localized level of Trinidad, the Nepuyos, identified by the Spanish as sub-tribe of the Caribs, were allies of the Spanish missionaries. Historians write that the Amerindians of the Missions of San Agustín de Arauca (today’s Arouca), San Pablo de Tacarigua (Tacarigua), and the Partido de Quare (Caura), were of “the Nepuyo Nation, a part of the Carib stock who had generations before migrated from the Lower Orinoco and settled in the northern part of Trinidad and particularly between San Josef and Matura”.⁶³

Starting in the 1600s, cultural transformations of Amerindian polities were already being recorded, along with evidence of pragmatic native appropriations of dominant European ascriptions. Even before Spanish rule had been consolidated in the Caribbean, the ‘Caribs’ were miscegenated to some degree and even ‘multi-national’, that is, consisting of a mix of peoples from the Americas, Europe and Africa. Dominica is often portrayed as the centre of the Carib regional domain, the base from where they launched attacks on the isolated plantations of Spanish settlers as far away as Puerto Rico, even capturing Spanish ships and occupants as they passed Dominica. Hulme and Whitehead note: “although European adult males were often killed outright during such attacks, many other individuals were simply taken into captivity as wives [and] servants”.⁶⁴ Moreover, there were common estimates of “there being up to 300 European and African captives on Dominica”.⁶⁵ Bernáldez de Quiroz, the Procurator General of Puerto Rico, speaking of attacks from Dominica against Puerto Rico, wrote, “they have carried away a great quantity of negroes and left some in Dominica and distributed the rest amongst the Indians

⁶⁰ The Warao are not classified as either Carib or Arawak, nor is their language classed within the linguistic stocks of either of those groups.

⁶¹ Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. II*, 13.

⁶² Writing in the early 1620s, Espinosa certifies: “The tribe of the Aruaca Indians is among the most valiant...feared for their bravery by their neighbours and adjoining tribes, they are envied by the Indians of other tribes; they were always very loyal friends of the Spaniards, and when the latter came from Spain in the year 1595, they helped, served, and assisted them in all their needs”: Espinosa, *Description of the Indies*, 68. Espinosa also glowingly speaks of Aracoraima, “the valiant cacique of the Aruacas”, whose “village of Caroa, which was at the tip of the island of Trinidad...went to the island of Margarita to pledge 24 of his women for the sum of 6,000 pesos’ worth of axes, knives, and other trade goods, in order to build a fleet of 120 vessels against these Caribs”: *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁶³ Wise, *Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. III*, 87. In the 1730s, Spanish municipal officials in Trinidad wrote to the King to impress upon him the loyalty and service of the Nepuyos. They wrote: “we have the greater reason to keep the Indians happy and contented, especially these Nepuyos, who are the only Indians who will supply men to oppose the enemies of your Royal Crown and who are always in the forefront of battle”, and, “we know well from experience the loyalty and zeal with which they have always served Your Majesty”, hence the need, they stressed, to “foster the best interests of these Indians”: *Ibid.*, 87-88.

⁶⁴ In *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day*, eds. Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 38.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

of these islands, which they take to their lands in order to serve them.⁶⁶ Reportedly they also captured Spanish infants as well as ‘important’ Spanish women from passing ships. Some assimilation is remarked to have occurred by eyewitness accounts offered by escapees, who spoke of captives that “go about naked by day and night, and they paint them like themselves, making them sleep on the ground”.⁶⁷ These accounts speak of Spanish men and women in Dominica “who were already as much *caribes* as the rest of them, and the women say that they no longer remember God...and they do just as the Indians do”.⁶⁸

By the start of the 1600s there had already been a significant degree of cultural change, with the Amerindians found to have incorporated many items of European culture.⁶⁹ The chaplain to the Earl of Cumberland found Caribs in Dominica and reported in 1598, “they speak some Spanish words”,⁷⁰ which presumably could have been learnt from their captives. In the mid-1700s in Dominica, “run-away slaves” made “common cause with the Caribs” in order to defend their forests.⁷¹ Others note that acculturation must have begun at an early date as shown by the ‘Caribized’ words of Spanish origin included in Father Raymond Breton’s famous dictionary of 1665.⁷²

Interestingly, at this stage, miscegenation did *not* represent a lack of ‘Carib-ness’ in European eyes, as much as it would two centuries later. In the 1600s, chroniclers could write of cultural change amongst the Caribs as ‘Caribization’; by the 1800s and thereafter, the term became ‘Hispanization’. Both represent processes of cultural change, of Carib interaction with Europeans, but only the latter term seems to evoke images of cultural ‘loss’. One of the primary differences between the two characterizations and the two time periods is that in the case of Caribization (1600s), one might argue Carib polities still retained considerable power to affect events, while in the case of Hispanization (1800s), Caribs had become wards of the Spanish. The main ingredient here then is power, rather than the nitty-gritty ‘cultural stuff’ of aboriginal lives.

By the end of the 1600s, Capuchin missionaries in Trinidad had brought over 5,000 Amerindians under their control, incorporating them into agricultural settlements producing cocoa for export.⁷³ In the view of some historians, by 1716, “the great majority of [Trinidad’s] Indians had become ‘Hispanized’; that is, Christian, Spanish-speaking...organized into villages under some degree of control by the Church...[and] the Government”, and by Spanish settlers who used them as laborers on their estates.⁷⁴ By 1765 there were 1,277 Christianized Indians in a total population of 2,503.⁷⁵ By the end of the 1700s the Amerindian subsistence economy had been replaced by commercial estates; land was increasingly privately owned; Amerindians were moved into urban settlements; indigenous religious beliefs declined in favour of monotheistic

⁶⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁷ De Quiroz quoted in Hulme and Whitehead, *Wild Majesty*, 40.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁹ Hulme and Whitehead, *Wild Majesty*, 45.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁷¹ Bell, *Report on the Caribs of Dominica*.

⁷² Douglas Taylor, “Columbus Saw Them First”, in *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day*, eds. Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992 [1941]), 315; Raymond Breton, *Carib-Spanish Dictionary* Trans. Duna Troiani (Paris: CELIA-CNRS, 2001[1665]) <http://www.sup-infor.com/ultimes/breton/dico_gari.htm> [accessed 21 May 2001]

⁷³ Harricharan, *The Catholic Church in Trinidad, I*, 21.

⁷⁴ Bridget Brereton, “Trinidad: 1592 to the 1770s” in *The Book of Trinidad*, eds. Gerard Besson and Bridget Brereton (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Paria Publishing Co., Ltd, 1991), 36.

⁷⁵ Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad*, 4.

Catholicism; and, Amerindian kinship systems became progressively Europeanized.⁷⁶ However, the problem with these interpretations is that they are made from afar (temporally and in ethnographic terms)—there is nothing to say that residing on a mission and overtly practicing the Catholic faith, as recorded by European chroniclers and clergy, is a faithful indication of thorough Christianization. Indeed, even the current Carib community in Arima, Trinidad, maintains only occasional ties with the Catholic Church, preferring instead to seize upon the few Catholic rituals that most directly serve to maintain communal cohesion.

With the expansion of the missions' cocoa fields in the 1600s, within a short time “the missions absorbed all the available labor and little was left for the Spanish planters”.⁷⁷ By 1701, planters in Trinidad sent a petition to Governor Don Felipe de Artieda, seeking the release of Indians from missions to supply labor for expanding their own cocoa cultivation.⁷⁸ At this stage, the planters were now anxious to stress that the Amerindians were “already civilized”.⁷⁹ It is unsurprising, given the patterns we have seen thus far, that the planters would report that as missionaries abandoned the island after the King's *cédula* ordered them to the mainland, the Amerindians went back to forest areas and, “continued ‘the idolatrous practices of their fathers’”, and thus, once more, they were “uncivilized” and needed to be conquered.⁸⁰ At this stage, civilized versus non-civilized, mission versus non-mission, became the dominant dichotomies in European colonial attempts to sort out native enemies and allies. The degree to which Amerindians were ‘Christianized’ clearly remains open to question.

What have the Indians of Trinidad become? 1756-1849

By the 1780s, a large-scale transformation of colonial Trinidadian society got underway. After a succession of European peace treaties, Trinidad decided to open its doors to French Caribbean immigrants and their slaves in an effort to revitalize the Trinidad economy by entering into lucrative sugar production and thereby also increasing the island's population. These French immigrants were also seeking to flee from wars and uprisings affecting various French territories in the Caribbean. Hence in 1783 the *Cédula de población* was promulgated, stipulating that the new arrivals must be Roman Catholic and bring property with them, that is, slaves and capital. These transformations would have immediate impacts on Trinidad's Amerindians, as similar European treaties of 1783 would have on Caribs in the wider Caribbean and on Indians in the United States, which consisted primarily of schemes to place aboriginal groups on reservations and to institute Christianization and assimilation campaigns.⁸¹ In 1797 the British seized Trinidad, which was formally ceded by Spain in 1802.

It seems clear that at this time Trinidad's Amerindians were not particularly ‘valued’ in the overall scheme of things, and, indeed, were moved out of the way. This was, as some put it, the era of King Sugar, and the lands the Amerindians had occupied were suited to sugar cane, whereas Arima is located in a hilly area more suited to cocoa cultivation. By 1793, sugar became

⁷⁶ Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad*, 4, 229.

⁷⁷ Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸¹ Crispin Gregoire and Natalia Kanem, “The Caribs of Dominica: Land Rights and Ethnic Consciousness” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 13(1989): 52; Pauline Strong and Barrik Van Winkle, “American Indians and American Nationalism” *Social Analysis* 33 (Sept 1993): 12.

Trinidad's main industry.⁸² In 1796 there were 159 sugar plantations and 60 cocoa estates; by 1802 there were 192 sugar plantations and 57 cocoa estates.⁸³ By 1809 sugar was responsible for 68.7% of the total cultivated acreage in Trinidad; sugar production increased from 4.2 million pounds in 1802 to 25.95 million pounds in 1809.⁸⁴ Cocoa, however, faced a glut in the world market by 1827, and prices fell by 90%.⁸⁵ Cocoa, we must note, was also the primary commodity cultivated by the Amerindians in the Arima Mission. Not only did this lessen the economic importance of Amerindians in the colony, there was also an associated decline in the fortunes of their 'patrons', Trinidad's remaining Spanish landed oligarchs. Following the influx of vast numbers of wealthy French and free colored planters from 1783 onwards, along with the formal takeover by the British in 1802, adding yet another strata of higher ranking élites, the Spanish found themselves progressively marginalized: in 1802, Governor Picton stated that there were only six or seven Spaniards of "any respectability" in Trinidad.⁸⁶ Others have also commented that, "the old Spanish Creoles of St. Joseph, impoverished and isolated, lost all influence over the affairs of their native island.... a number relapsed into poverty and obscurity, and disappeared from the historical record. This destiny was to be shared, ultimately, by the Amerindians".⁸⁷

By 1785, the last Spanish governor of Trinidad, José María Chacón, consolidated the northern villages of Tacarigua, Arauca and Cuara, at Arima.⁸⁸ The Amerindian population of Tacarigua was 193 and that of Arauca was 297.⁸⁹ A total of 632 Indians, led by the Venezuelan Father Pedro Reyes Bravo, were transferred to Arima.⁹⁰ The reason for amalgamating in Arima the Indians from the quarter of Tacarigua/Arouca was probably twofold, argues a Trinidadian historian who belongs to the Dominican Order: "to give their lands to the new colonists, and to segregate the Indians, for their own good, from the newcomers".⁹¹ Hence, Arima was to be the place of the Amerindians.⁹²

The alleged intent of the church was to preserve the 'racial' and residential integrity of the Amerindian community under its control. Friars had, "prohibited 'mission' Indians from contact with 'bush' Indians, Negro slaves, mestizos or other Spaniards and kept them confined to the missions".⁹³ Noel argued that one of the successes of the Capuchins, "seems to have been the partial preservation of the Indigenous race as agricultural workers under the external guise of

⁸² Cheryl Stephens, "Labour supply and labour organization in the cocoa industry of Trinidad, 1870-1920", (Master's thesis, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, 1985), 12.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Newson, Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad, 194.

⁸⁷ Brereton, A History of Modern Trinidad, 20.

⁸⁸ Leahy, Catholic Church in Trinidad, 102.

⁸⁹ Noel, Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela, 97.

⁹⁰ Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh, The Cocoa Panyols of Trinidad: An Oral Record (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 13.

⁹¹ Leahy, Catholic Church in Trinidad, 102; Wise, Historical Sketches of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol. IV, 40; Collens, Centenary of Trinidad, 115.

⁹² De Verteuil confirmed the specifics of this move: "Soon after the [1783] settlement of the colony, these Indians had been formed into two missions at Tacarigua and Arima. But as the formation of *ingenios*, or sugar estates, was proceeding eastward, they were removed to the quarter of Arima, where a village was formed, and houses built by them, on about one thousand acres which has been granted for the formation of a mission, along the right bank of the river, and as the full and unalienable property of the inhabitants": De Verteuil, Trinidad: Its Geography, 299-300.

⁹³ Harricharan, The Catholic Church in Trinidad, I, 92.

living a Catholic life”.⁹⁴ On the other hand, Venezuelan immigrants, many of whom were *mestizos* and *pardos*, were encouraged to settle in Arima from the earliest days of the mission.

In the early 1800s in Trinidad, the population consisted largely of ‘whites’, ‘blacks’, Amerindians and Venezuelan ‘peones’. Only ‘blacks’ were enslaved and thus, per force, occupied the bottom rung of the colonial ‘race’ hierarchy. The Amerindian occupied a relatively privileged position in this hierarchy. One historian writes that censuses of the 1800s in Trinidad eventually included Amerindians in the ‘White’ category.⁹⁵ In terms of ‘physical traits’ the Trinidadian ‘Panyol’ or the so-called peon from Venezuela, “with his mixture of three races—black, white and Amerindian—was, according to the ideals of the Trinidad society, in a favorable position: his hair was straight or wavy, and his skin was light”.⁹⁶

Amerindians in the Mission of Arima were marked as “Indio” in the baptismal registers (see Table 1), at least until the 1840s when the practice suddenly stopped. From colonial Mexico to Spanish and then British Trinidad, the Indio classification also related to “a very real economic category”.⁹⁷ In the Trinidadian case, this category was that of free labor, engaged in peasant production. Belonging to this category allegedly entitled the ‘Indians’ to certain privileges, as explained by Martin Sorzano, the *ex-corregidor* of the Mission: “they were even exempted from taxes paid by other free classes in the community, and had medical attendance furnished to them gratis”.⁹⁸

Table 1: Baptismal Statistics for Amerindians in the Arima Mission, 1820-1852

TIME PERIOD	TOTAL # OF AMERINDIANS BAPTISED	TOTAL # OF PEOPLE BAPTISED	AMERINDIANS AS A % OF THE TOTAL
1820-1835	192	1511	12.71%
1835-1840	51	497	10.26%
1840-1852	7	1446	0.48%

Sources: Baptismal Registers of the Mission of Santa Rosa, Arima: Book 1 (1820-1835), Book 2 (1835-1840), Baptismal Register of the Church of Santa Rosa, Arima: Book 3 (1840-1852)

The size of the Amerindian population of Trinidad in this late colonial period is displayed in Table 2 below.

⁹⁴ Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela*, 18.

⁹⁵ Leahy, *Catholic Church in Trinidad*, 104.

⁹⁶ Sylvia Maria Moodie, “Survival of Hispanic Religious Songs in Trinidad Folklore”, *Caribbean Quarterly* 29 (1983): 5.

⁹⁷ Victor W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 139.

⁹⁸ Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad*, 109.

Table 2: Trinidad Amerindian Population Statistics, 1782-1838

YEAR	AMERINDIAN TOTAL	TRINIDAD TOTAL	AMERINDIANS AS % OF TRINIDAD TOTAL
1777 ^a		3433	
1782 ^g	2082		
1784 ^a	1495		
1786 ^a	1391		
1787 ^a	1414	11533	12.26%
1788 ^a	1428	11722	12.18%
1789 ^a	2200 ^g / 1432 ^a	13053 ^a	10.97% ^a
1790 ^a	1408	13247	10.63%
1791 ^a	1398	12009	11.64%
1792 ^a	1195	14009	8.53%
1793 ^a	1268	14744	8.60%
1794 ^a	1144	15519	7.37%
1795 ^a	1078	15279	7.05%
1797 ^{g,b}	1082	17718 ^f	6.11%
1799 ^g	1148		
1800 ^g	1071		
1801 ^g	1212		
1802 ^g	1166	28477 ^f	4.09%
1803 ^g	1416		
1804 ^g	1416		
1805 ^g	1733		
1806 ^g	1697	30043 ^f	5.65%
1809 ^d	1647	32095 ^f	5.13%
1812 ^e	1804		
1819 ^d	850	39935 ^f	2.13%
1821 ^e	956		
1824 ^c	893	41120 ^f	2.17%
1828 ^d	727	41020 ^{f†}	1.77%
1838 ^e	520	39328 ^f	1.32%

SOURCES:

a: Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela*, 94, 96, 103, 104.

b: “Plan for the Isle of Trinidad made from actual surveys in the year 1797”.

c: The Trinidad Almanac for 1824, quoted in Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies*, 12.

d: Fraser, *History of Trinidad (Second Period)*, 211.

e: Wood, *Trinidad in Transition*, 43-44.

f: Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad*, 110.

g: Fraser, *History of Trinidad (First Period)*, 288, 289.

† figure is for the year 1829

HISTORICAL NOTES:

1797: British capture of Trinidad

1802: Spanish cession of Trinidad

1808: Abolition of the slave trade

1824: Transfer of slaves from one British colony to another was prohibited

1834: Emancipation of slaves, start of Apprenticeship

1838: End of Apprenticeship

1849: *De facto* dissolution of the Arima Mission

Under the Spanish, *Indio* became a category that signified a state of cultural loss. Speaking of colonial Mexico, Victor Turner explained: “the term ‘Indio’ is highly ambiguous.... It cannot...be applied to any kind of tribal group with an indigenous political system and religious and other customs handed down from pre-Columbian times”.⁹⁹ Later usage of *Indio* in the 1700s and 1800s, Turner argues, seemed to refer to all the depressed and underprivileged masses, including *mestizos*,¹⁰⁰ in a manner that parallels the use of “Indian” to include the Venezuelan ‘peons’ in early British Trinidad. It is also likely that *Indio* and “Indian” had different meanings for the Spanish and the British respectively. As Leahy argues, the designation “Indian” often had a wider meaning for the British than the Spanish: “for several years it included peons or free laborers from the mainland, possibly because the peons were usually employed, like the Indians, in clearing forests for cultivation, possibly too because some of the peons may have been Indians”.¹⁰¹

Given the apparent acceptance of *Indio* as the label used by officials to speak of Trinidad’s Amerindians, some authors of the time also began to question the ‘true origins’ of the Amerindians. One of the primary debates about Trinidadian indigenous history centred on whether Trinidad’s Amerindians were either Arawak or Carib, continuing in the either/or tradition founded in early Spanish colonial discourse. The search for a single denomination for all of Trinidad’s remaining Amerindians seems to have begun in earnest in the late 1700s, at a time when they were marginalized in the colonial economy in favour of sugar plantations and African slavery and thus reduced to a protected, if dispossessed minority confined to missions. In 1788, a British parliament report referred to Trinidad’s Amerindians as “Yellow Caribs”, a term hitherto reserved for the St. Vincent context.¹⁰² Alexander von Humboldt, the famed traveler and writer, attested at the dawn of the 1800s that, “the native tribes of Trinidad, and the village of Cumana, are all tribes of the great Caribbee nation”.¹⁰³ E. L. Joseph, an English writer who resided in Trinidad in the early 1800s, instead insisted: “that the Caribes had no footing in Trinidad, may be learned from Las Casas....such enmity existed between the Caribes and the other races, that they never could have resided in the same island”.¹⁰⁴ What Joseph does is to extract Las Casas’ assertions from the context in which they were written, thereby obscuring Las Casas’ motivation to fend off slave traders preying on groups designated as ‘Carib’. As a result, Joseph this perpetuated the binary opposition of Carib versus Arawak. Joseph’s volume has since been reprinted and remains a widely quoted source in the bulk of historical research on Trinidad.

Table 3 attempts to chart the range of labels applied to Amerindians in Trinidad and its closest environs. The heavy dashed vertical line marks the transition from Spanish to British rule.

⁹⁹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Leahy, *Catholic Church in Trinidad*, 104. Once again, the term ‘peon’, in the Trinidadian context, refers to Venezuelan immigrant laborers, also called ‘Cocoa Panyols’ and ‘Spanish’—even today, the label ‘Spanish’ and ‘Carib’ are conflated in popular usage in northeastern Trinidad, the two treated synonymously, with labels such as ‘mestizo’ (the offspring of an Amerindian-European union) having disappeared from local usage by the mid-1850s.

¹⁰² Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, Vol. XXVI, 1789, “Evidence about the Caribs in Trinidad given by Alexander Campbell before the committee enquiring into the Slave Trade, 1788”, London, 27th May 1788.

¹⁰³ Quoted in N. Ober, “Aborigines of the West Indies”, *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 9 (Oct 1893-Oct 1894), 301.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 118-119.

Table 3: Temporal Range in Colonial Designations of Trinidad’s Indigenes

1492	1500	To Mid-	To Late	Early	1708	1786-	Late
	1600s	1600s	1600s	1700s	1756	Mid- 1800s	1800s
INDIO	Carib	Dutch Carib	Dutch Carib	Warao	Christian Indian	<i>Indio</i> Indian	<i>Indio</i> Indian 'Cocoa Panyol' Peon
	Vs.	Vs.	Vs.	Vs.	Vs.		
	Arawak	Arawak	Spanish Carib	Nepuyo	Wild Indian		

None of the statistics presented thus far makes any allowance for the significance of miscegenation and cultural creolization. They are simply racial statistics, based on some overt measure of phenotypical ‘purity’, in order to determine who would have access to the rights, privileges, and burdens of being Amerindian in colonial Trinidad. Otherwise, these statistics tell us very little of value in terms of self-identification and ongoing Amerindian cultural practices.

What has become of the Indians of Trinidad? 1849-1900

Following what seems to have been an arbitrary and illegal dissolution of the Mission of Arima, one dominant thesis proposed the view that Trinidad’s Amerindians simply became ‘virtually extinct’, that is, reduced in numbers or ‘racially diluted’ through ‘mixture’ thus no longer exercising a presence as a ‘race’. The second major thesis, which does not contradict but rather refocuses the first, is that Amerindians and Spaniards had become mutually assimilated and miscegenated. In addition, by the 1800s in Trinidad, Amerindians once depicted as war-like were now cast as child-like.

Here I wish to focus specifically on how colonial European writings characterized Trinidad’s mission Amerindians in the early 1800s, with especial emphasis on the ways they depicted the Amerindians’ state of being. We can detect at least four major themes in these depictions: (1) Amerindians languishing in a perpetual state of indolent torpor; (2) cultural loss, dilution of tradition, and the lack of a conscious identity, as also a condition of their apparent lifelessness; (3) Amerindians as children, in a state of historical and cultural infancy as well, deprived not just of power but also of cultural self-knowledge; and, (4) the Amerindian as ‘untrue’ to his/her ‘race’, abandoning Amerindian marital bonds, and the resultant ‘mixture’ that resulted in ‘approximate extinction’. In contrast to romantic primitivism, these characterizations amount, I would argue, to a form of writing and thinking about Amerindians that we ought to call *pathetic primitivism*, as oft expressed by the phrase “these poor Indians”, especially with reference to these apparently post-Carib creatures hospitalized within the missions. These writings reflect and narrate a uniquely transitional period in Trinidadian history, of a colony in transition from Spanish ‘underdevelopment’ (according to the self-justifications of Trinidad’s new colonists and later generations of national developmentalists), to one that aimed to be a thriving part of the world economy; and, a colony uncertain about its mode of exploiting the lower classes (after all, this was a cloudy period when abolition and emancipation loomed on the horizon) and thus uncertain about the comparative value of ‘freemen’ such as Amerindians versus that of African slaves.

‘Indolent Torpor’

H. N. Coleridge, a cousin of the more prominent Samuel Coleridge, spent some time in Trinidad and wrote about his various journeys throughout the island, including visits at its various Amerindian missions. “Every one, who goes to Trinidad”, Coleridge wrote, “should make a point of visiting the Indian missions of Arima and Savana Grande”, in order to witness these “poor dear Indians”.¹⁰⁵ Joseph too stated that, “Arima is a neat village, and is interesting, because in and about it reside the largest assemblage of the remnant of the aboriginal Indians anywhere to be found in the island”.¹⁰⁶ With reference to the Arima Mission, which Coleridge visited in 1825, he described the Amerindians as sitting for hours in motionless silence.¹⁰⁷ Yet, far more elaborate was his ‘description’ of the Amerindians of the Mission of Savana Grande, one worthy of being reproduced at length here:

They seem to be the identical race of people whose forefathers Columbus discovered, and the Spaniards worked to death in Hispaniola.... They are short in stature, (none that I saw exceeding five feet and six inches) yellow in complexion, their eyes dark, their hair long, lank and glossy as a raven’s wing; they have a remarkable space between the nostrils and the upper lip, and a breadth and massiveness between the shoulders that would do credit to the Farnese Hercules. Their hands and feet, however, are small-boned and delicately shaped....Nothing seems to affect them like other men; neither joy or sorrow, anger, or curiosity, take any hold of them; both mind and body are drenched in the deepest apathy; the children lie quietly on their mothers’ bosoms; silence is in their dwellings and idleness in all their ways....The Indians were all summoned forth, and the *alcalde* and the *regidores* stood in front with their wands of office. These were nearly the only signs of life which they displayed; they neither smiled or spoke or moved, but stood like mortals in a deep trance having their eyes open....The governor [Sir Ralph Woodford] gave a piece of money to each of the children, which was received with scarcely the smallest indication of pleasure or gratitude by them or their parents....They were much more completely clothed than the negroes; the decency of the female dress was conspicuous, and both the maiden’s and the mother’s bosom were modestly shrouded from the gaze of man....The amazing contrast between these Indians and the negroes powerfully arrested my attention. Their complexions do not differ so much as their minds and dispositions. In the first, life stagnates; in the last, it is tremulous with irritability....I know nothing more delightful than to be met by a group of negro girls, and be saluted with their kind ‘How d’ye, massa? How d’ye massa?’ their sparkling eyes and bunches of white teeth....It is said that even the slaves despise the Indians, and I think it very probable; the latter are decidedly inferior as intelligent beings....Indeed their history and existence form a deep subject for speculation. The flexibility of temper of the rest of mankind has been for the most part denied to them; they wither under transportation, they die under labor; they will never willingly or generally amalgamate with the races of Europe or Africa; if left to themselves with ample means of subsistence, they decrease in numbers every year; if compelled to any kind of improvement, they reluctantly acquiesce, and relapse with certainty the moment the external compulsion ceases. They shrink before the approach of other nations as it were by instinct; they are now not known in vast countries of which they were once the only inhabitants....[they are] destined to be swept from the face of the earth.¹⁰⁸

Coleridge’s depiction is special insofar as it is the one of the few that cast Amerindians as inferior to Africans, and claims that Amerindians avoided contact with the other ‘races’—indeed,

¹⁰⁵ Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies*, 82, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 102.

¹⁰⁷ Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies*, 122-123.

the consensus among later writers is that just the opposite was true: miscegenation was intense. This passage, and those that follow, generally show the Europeans' fairly low opinion of the Amerindians in the late 1700s and very early 1800s, as well as a certain ambivalence in terms of high regard for their appearance and light complexions, and low regard for their economic role in the colony.

E. L. Joseph also produced a characterization that mirrors Coleridge's for its incessant emphasis on the lifeless character of the Amerindian. In this regard, Joseph wrote the following:

Children of the island they are, in more than one sense of the word. They are as thoughtless, although not as lively, as infancy; left to themselves, they would become wanderers of the wood, or would starve in their encampments. They are remarkably free from all crime, insomuch, that I never heard of one of our Indians being accused of a crime. But their total want of mental and (unless violently excited) bodily energy is beyond credibility; the greatest earthly good of the poor Indian of Trinidad seems to consist in crouching on their haunches and remaining in a state of waking torpor or of somnolency, and it is not easy to tell the difference between the torpor and the sleep of the Indian....The glorious robe in which nature is arrayed delights not his eye; the charms of beauty have little influence on him—he views these as an ox regards a flower-garden, who merely looks amongst the blossoms for objects for the gratification of his appetite. Wine, which maketh glad the heart of man, seems to have no effect on the poor Indian; a moderate quantity of strong drink produces no visible effect on him; let him drink to excess, and he calmly crouches with his thighs doubled up and the whole weight of his frame resting on his heels; in this Simian posture he sleeps off the fumes of his tranquil inebriety.¹⁰⁹

'Cultural Loss'

The theme of cultural loss and vanishing traditions was one of the common themes recurring in descriptions of Arima's Amerindians. One 1833 account of the Arima Amerindians portrayed them as numbering around 200, only speaking Spanish, with no ancestral traditions, "still less are they aware that the whole island was formerly theirs", and "their little world is now limited to Arima".¹¹⁰ This alleged state of being 'without identity or tradition' was repeated even more emphatically by Joseph after his visit to Arima. He wrote that "little information has been obtained from themselves" concerning their origins and he adds: "as to the Indians of the present day, their tradition extends not even as far back as the time when the Spaniards first visited their island".¹¹¹ Joseph emphasizes that "the Arawaks of the present day are not in the same situation that they were when these islands were discovered. During the last three and a half centuries, their national spirit was broken, their arts lost, and yet they have learned nothing of civilization but its vices and its crimes".¹¹²

'The Infantile Indian'

In addition to 'indolence' and being 'without tradition', European colonial accounts of Trinidad's Amerindians in these early decades of the 1800s also stressed a third, major theme: that of the Amerindian as a child. Joseph wrote in this vein about the "harmless and inactive children of the island".¹¹³ De Verteuil did not actively endorse the view of Indians as children, merely reporting that this was in fact how they were viewed under the law: "The Indians were

¹⁰⁹ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 102.

¹¹⁰ John Newel Lewis, *Ajoupa* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: J. Newel Lewis, 1983), 29.

¹¹¹ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 118.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 120-121.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

considered in the light of minors, and could not sell or otherwise dispose of their property, which however descended to their natural heirs”.¹¹⁴ Writing much later, but with reference to this period, Fraser tells us that “when the English became masters of the Island, the few Indians who remained were little better than ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’. To a great extent this was due to the laws enacted for their protection, which by treating them as children who never came of age, crushed out of them all feelings of independence”.¹¹⁵

‘The Vanishing Indian’

The fourth major way of characterizing the Amerindian in Trinidad, one that would prove fairly resilient, relates to the question of whether the Amerindian even existed by this time, and the character issue involved is that of the Amerindian who is ‘untrue to his own race’. Thus, Joseph stated that, of the Chaima Indians, “but one family at present is known to exist in Trinidad”.¹¹⁶ However, more than just plain statements of groups disappearing from the map, is the recurrent focus on the notion of *approximate extinction by inter-racial mixture*. Thus, Joseph wrote, “this indolent harmless race is here fast merging on extinction—from no fault of the local government, nor from any disease: the births amongst the Indian women exceed the deaths in the usual ratio”, instead, he says the reason for this is, “that the Indian men, since they are obliged to live in society, choose mates of other races, and the women do the same (Mr. Coleridge was misinformed when he stated that the Indians will not intermarry with other races), hence out of every seven children born of an Indian mother during the last 30 years, there are scarcely two of pure blood, as I have been informed” and Joseph thus concludes that, “this will of course decrease their population; for those of the mixed race, whether they be Samboes (between Negroes and Indians), or Mustees (between Europeans and Indians), or the countless castes that the admixture between the African, European, and Indian tribes produce, they are not the real aboriginal race, and leave the inactive community of Indians as soon as they reach the age of discretion”.¹¹⁷

This is one of the first written statements associating the ‘real Indian’ with the ‘pure Indian’. Moreover the ‘real Indian’ was tied to the Mission, and the ‘mixed Indian’ was free. In line with Joseph, the *ex-corregidor* of the Arima Mission, Martin Sorzano, testifying before the Burnley Commission, engaged in the following exchange:

[Question] 562. To what, then, do you ascribe the gradual and rapid diminution in their number?
[Answer by Sorzano:] Chiefly to the gradual mixture of the races. As pure Indians they were compelled to remain at the mission, and conform to the regulations; but the children born of Spanish and Creole fathers could not be so classed, and would not submit to the restraint of remaining there.¹¹⁸

In terms of the prominent thesis that Trinidadian Amerindians became virtually extinct, De Verteuil commented that the Amerindians of Arima had “finally sunk under the ascendancy of a more intelligent race”.¹¹⁹ In a passage that is circulated in various texts of today,¹²⁰ De Verteuil also wrote:

¹¹⁴ De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography*, 300.

¹¹⁵ Fraser, *History of Trinidad (First Period)*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 121.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

¹¹⁸ Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad*, 109.

¹¹⁹ De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography*, 172.

The few aborigines yet remaining in the colony are leading an isolated life in the forests, depending for their subsistence upon hunting and fishing, using the bow and arrow in preference to the fowling-piece, and, in short, retaining their savage ancestral habits precisely as if the light of civilization and the sun of Christianity had never beamed on their lovely island of *Jere*. A few families of Indian descent are still, however, to be met with in different parts of the island, all speaking the Spanish language and having preserved Spanish habits—fond of smoking, dancing, and all other kinds of amusements, but above all, of the *dolce far niente*. They are, generally, possessors of *conucos*, that is to say of a few acres of land, which they cultivate in provisions and coffee, but particularly in cacao.¹²¹

The importance of De Verteuil's writing is that he himself had been raised in the Arima district when it was still a mission in the early half of the 1800s, and his widely quoted text is a cornerstone of Trinidad's 19th century historical literature, which is also some of the first published literature from or about Trinidad.¹²² The De Verteuil family had long been part of the landed oligarchy, with holdings in cocoa, and maintained close links with the upper echelons of the Catholic church, in which some members also served as high ecclesiastical officers. Indeed, for almost the past two centuries, the De Verteuil family in Trinidad has generated a chain of authors on Trinidad's history as well as priests and school teachers.

De Verteuil, writing not too long afterwards, also added that while,

it is highly probable that many did seek a refuge and home in the virgin forests of Venezuela...I also coincide in opinion with some judicious observers, who trace the approximate extinction of those tribes to the marked presence manifested by the Indian women towards the negroes and the whites, by whom they were kindly treated, whilst they were regarded by their husbands, of kindred race, more as slaves and beasts of burden, than as equals or companions. As a consequence of those connections, there exists at present, in the colony, a certain number of individuals of Indian descent, but of mixed blood.¹²³

Here again we see the launch of a discourse that persists almost as strongly today as it did in the early 1800s, that the mixed Indian is 'not pure', and that Trinidad only possesses people who can, 'at best', be classified as of 'Indian descent' rather than Indian 'proper', thus demonstrating the full racialization of indigeneity in the 19th century Trinidadian context.

In the end, these arguments of the 'approximate extinction' of the Amerindian may also have been motivated by a desire to usurp the mission lands of the Amerindians, especially as some of the writers themselves belonged to the local landed élite (e.g. De Verteuil), or wrote their texts in consultation with the 'old established families of the area' (e.g. Joseph). There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that this was their motivation, it is merely a possibility given that they, their kin, or their associated stood to gain from the displacement. The names of prominent families of the local plantocracy are still inscribed on street signs throughout modern Arima.

As I mentioned at the outset, while the cultural assumptions of colonial elites on the topic of the racial identity of the Amerindians would serve to condition whether or not such people continued to exist in Trinidad, larger political economic forces also weighed heavily in arriving at such determinations. Indeed, the politics of race and colonial political economy were by no

¹²⁰ For example, Moodie-Kublalsingh, *The Cocoa Panyols of Trinidad*, and Anthony, *Towns and Villages*.

¹²¹ De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography*, 174-175.

¹²² According to Sr. Marie Thérèse, Rétout, O.P., *Parish Beat* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Inprint Caribbean Ltd., 1976).

¹²³ De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography*, 172.

means divorced. Race, in colonial Trinidad, entailed a position in a system of rights, or the lack thereof. Specific peoples were assigned to particular categories of labor, and sometimes to particular crops (i.e., Africans and sugar, Amerindians and cocoa). Shifts in the economic bases of a colony would also entail shifts in how particular groups were targeted by colonial policy and how they would be re-valued ideologically. While the Mission of Arima was in force, one designated as *Indio* meant that the person had a legal right to live in the Mission, bound to it by law, with free use of inalienable land, and without the requirement of paying taxes. Unlike African slaves and indentured East Indians, their labor was not to be forced. *Mestizo* meant that the person was part Amerindian, part Spanish in parentage, no longer legally bound to the Mission. Their labor was still free, but they were also required to pay taxes.

Great Britain signed a formal treaty with Spain in 1802 where the latter *ceded* its colony to Britain on the condition that certain provisions were met. Amongst these conditions were the safeguarding of the Catholic religion and the rights to property enjoyed by Trinidad's long-standing Spanish settler. Given these conditions, it is at the very least implied that the Catholic Missions for the Amerindians would be safeguarded. The fact that we know this to be true is attested to by the actions, decrees and letters of Governor Sir Ralph Woodford in his actions to protect and consolidate the Mission of Arima, according to the laws then in force to which he referred.

The treaty by which Spain ceded Trinidad to Great Britain was the *Treaty of Amiens*, signed on 25 March 1802, and ratified on 18 April of that year.¹²⁴ Several states were signatories to that Treaty. Spain had itself come under the domination of France and Napoleon Bonaparte, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, fought between several European nations from 1799 to 1815. Britain conquered Trinidad in 1797 whereby Sir Ralph Abercrombie governed, in part as an action against its French adversary whose Spanish proxy ruled Trinidad.

Generally, the Treaty sought to make amends and pay compensation for the consequences of past hostilities. Territories conquered during wars were to be returned—with the exceptions of Trinidad and Ceylon, as stated under Article 3.¹²⁵ Article 4 simply reaffirmed this fact: “His Catholic majesty cedes and guarantees, in full property and sovereignty, the island of Trinidad to his Britannic majesty”. These measures were to go into force three months after the April ratification of the Treaty, thus in July of 1802.

In the case of a ceded territory, such as Trinidad, the Treaty stipulated the following protections in Article 13:

As to the inhabitants of the countries restored or ceded, it is hereby agreed, that no person shall, under any pretence, be prosecuted, disturbed, or molested, either in person or property, on account of his political conduct or opinion, or for his attachment to any of the contracting parties,

124 Treaty of Amiens, Reference Library of Diplomatic Documents

<<http://www.napoleonseries.org/reference/diplomatic/amiens.cfm>> [accessed 02 June 2003]. The Treaty was headed by the following notation: “Definitive Treaty of Peace between the French Republic, his Majesty the King of Spain and the Indies, and the Batavian Republic (on the one Part); and his Majesty, the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (on the other Part)”. The participants in the negotiations were the Marquis Cornwallis for Great Britain, Joseph Bonaparte for France, Don Josef Nicolas d’Azara for Spain, and Jean Schimmelpennick for the Batavian Republic.

¹²⁵ “His Britannic majesty restores to the French republic and its allies, viz. his Catholic majesty and the Batavian republic, all the possessions and colonies which respectively belonged to them, and which have been either occupied or conquered by the British forces, during the course of the present war, with the exception of the island of Trinidad, and of the Dutch possessions on the island of Ceylon”.

on any account whatever except for debts contracted with individuals, or for acts subsequent to the present treaty.

Under these provisions, properties held by the Catholic Church, and on behalf of its wards, the Amerindians, could not simply be expropriated.

What happened subsequent to 1802, and especially after the departure of Sir Ralph Woodford, speaks to the fact that the provisions of the Treaty were not honored, and that in some cases British officials treated Trinidad as in a state of a virtual *terra nullius* prior to British conquest. A land without people is of course a land free for the taking.¹²⁶ Amerindians who occupied what came to be valuable cocoa growing properties in and around Arima were said to have become extinct, or “nearly so”, which is a convenient means of expropriating lands safeguarded for them by the Catholic Church. As the Catholic Church tried to assert control over these lands, both local oligarchs and British Governors attempted to wrest control of lands used by the Church itself. By the late 1800s, Arima was a site of hostility between priests and the officers in charge of the Crown Colony.

At the start of the 1840s, as African slavery had ended and those emancipated had been released from their period of apprenticeship, and as colonial officials sought new lands in Trinidad for commercial exploitation, the Burnley Commission was established to inquire into a great many subjects including the status of the Indian Mission of Arima. Testifying before the Burnley Commission, the actual *corregidor* of the Mission himself, Martin Sorzano, was recorded in the following exchange on Friday, 16 July 1841:

[Question] 559. Do they [the Indians] not hold a tract of land set apart for their own use?

[Answer by Sorzano:] Yes, a tract of about 1,000 acres, granted to them by the King of Spain, to which Sir Ralph Woodford added afterwards 320 acres, in consequence of their complaining of a want of provision grounds.

[Question] 563. Is the mission, then, broken up?

[Answer by Sorzano:] Virtually it is so. No regulations are now enforced, and those who remain there follow orders, because they have the benefit of the crops of cocoa belonging to the mission....

[Question] 564. As they appear to have emancipated themselves from the regulations of the mission, do you think they have any legal claim to either the cocoa or the land at present?

[Answer by Sorzano:] I should think not; but it is a legal question, which I am not competent to answer.¹²⁷

The questions clearly probe the exploitability of Amerindian lands in Arima. The interpretation of the Commission seems to be hasty and enthusiastic about the notion that there is no real Mission to stand in the way of putting up the Mission lands for public sale. While Sorzano is ambiguous and states that “those who remain there follow orders”, and are certainly making use of their lands as held under the Mission, a Commission member rushes to conclusions in stating

¹²⁶ Indeed, this was suggested in a dispatch from Mr. Huskisson, Secretary of State for the Colonies, to Sir Ralph Woodford, an activist governor of Trinidad who take great pains to safeguard the Indian Mission of Arima: “Immemorial possession in the strict and absolute sense of the term seems indeed to be acknowledged as a valid title. But it might perhaps be difficult to rest any title upon that ground with reference to Lands situate in a Colony which within a period comparatively recent was an unoccupied wilderness, and one in which the rights of the Crown must in theory be conceived to have been absolute and universal before the settlement of the Colony commenced”: Quoted in Fraser, *History of Trinidad (Second Period)*, 222-223.

¹²⁷ Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad*, 109, 110.

that the Amerindians had “emancipated themselves from the regulations of the mission”. In fact, the process of alienating Amerindians from their lands was rather gradual, but started almost as soon as Governor Sir Ralph Woodford’s tenure in Trinidad ended in 1828, perhaps the only governor to have observed the Treaty of Amiens to the letter, and in the proper spirit.

In 1834, when a stipendiary magistrate was appointed, the Indians were brought under the common law, and the corregidorship was abolished. In 1849, after the passing of the territorial ordinance, the lots in the village of Arima, “were put up for sale at an upset price—a measure the legality of which is highly questionable, as far as the Indians were concerned, since the lands lost in the mission had been granted to them as a compensation for property of which they had been deprived”.¹²⁸ Indeed, De Verteuil reminds us of a critical point: lands provided for the Amerindians of the Mission of Arima were not provided as a “gift” to them, nor simply for the purpose of sustenance only while they remained on the Mission. The lands were provided as a compensation for *an earlier act of expropriation*, following 1783 when French Caribbean planters entered the colony and were given Amerindian lands in and around what are today known as Caura, Arouca, and Tacarigua.

The administration of Governor Lord Harris (1846-1854) reorganized and defined geographic boundaries in Trinidad, thus creating Ward boundaries in 1849, and embarking on the collection of Ward rates for public works development; however, those who could not pay the new Ward rates, or did not understand the law, had their lands confiscated and sold. Formal title to lands had to be demonstrated, or land deeds registered, which worked against Arima’s Amerindians who either possessed no such written deeds, were not informed as to the new policies, and in many cases could not read.¹²⁹ Self-described as Arima’s “sturdy beggars”, some cocoa planters vowed to fight new taxation laws that seemingly militated against all established land ownership in Arima that preceded Trinidad’s capture by the British.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, between 1846 and 1850, Governor Lord Harris authorized the selling of 96 plots of land in Arima, and some Amerindian families had secured *formal* title to only nine of these, followed even there by an apparent sell-off later on. Perhaps as many as 200 Amerindian families found themselves in a depressed economic environment, without land, and without work.¹³¹

Into the late 1870s and early 1880s, the expropriation of Amerindian lands continued to be challenged, especially with the active intervention of the new parish priest of Arima, Father Louis Daudier, a Parisian. Daudier challenged efforts by the British governor’s office to undermine the church’s own landholdings in a growing competition for resources between Anglicans and Catholics. In doing so, Daudier rooted the claims of the Catholic church in Trinidad in its mission history, thereby inevitably raising the issue of Amerindian landholdings as well. As Daudier wrote to this senior in the church:

¹²⁸ De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography*, 300.

¹²⁹ Moodie-Kublalsingh, *The Cocoa Panyols of Trinidad*, 6.

¹³⁰ An anonymous cocoa planter from Arima wrote on Harris’ plans for territorial regulation and taxation: “Should this law of indirect confiscation be passed, these planters will see their lands taken from them every year—those lands which many families have held long before the Conquest [the British takeover of 1797], and which were respected even by Sir Ralph Woodford as being in the *Libro Becero*. Little did the poor cocoa and coffee planters, and the small proprietors of every description, expect that, under a show of even-handed justice, the enormous [tax] burden would be laid on those least able to bear it....The *Sturdy Beggars* of Arima will employ every legal means to avert the destructive blow”. *The Port of Spain Gazette*, “Letter from ‘A Cocoa Planter’ in Arima”, Friday, 19 March 1847.

¹³¹ Anthony, *Towns and Villages*, 323.

the Spanish government generally exempted these lands from taxes, which was the case in Arima, and that made the land unalienable....they cannot deny at least that this land was Indian land or dedicated for use by the Indians....an Indian land, because all the documents subsequent to the Spaniards, in the archives of the government, show this evidence....two motives...oblige the Government to concede: 1) their status as the old Indian owners of the area, and the interest which they must inspire in their claim; 2) a kind of justice to compensate them for the Mission lands which they have lost when these lands should have remained intact....the authority of the Missionary has suffered from time and circumstances, but it has never been destroyed by any official act—it could be denied but it could not be destroyed as long as there are Mission lands and Indians....Also, by tradition and custom, each time that the Indians are in trouble it is to me that they come, to be their intermediary before the Government in their difficulties; and several Governors have accepted my petitions to make the pursuit against them as squatters cease.¹³²

In response to protracted agitation by Fr. Daudier, the Government responded, in “reference to certain old Indian lands at Arima” that “His Excellency [the Governor] had decided that these lands were liable to public competition”.¹³³

Father Daudier realized that certain entrenched interests would be affected by his campaign.¹³⁴ Daudier argued that the measures taken by the British authorities were effectively illegal, besides being unjust.¹³⁵ He realized that he was not winning any friends in government as a result of his sustained intervention in this issue, noting that, “they accuse me, in the Government, of mixing myself up too much in this affair of the Mission and the Indians of Arima”, and that, letters “sent by me to the Government, at the request of the Indians” were returned unanswered.¹³⁶ Daudier apparently campaigned on behalf of the Amerindians at their request, and he makes reference to a petition they had mounted. Speaking of this, Daudier writes that as to the “cultivable lands petitioned for by the Indians”, there are “two motives that oblige the Government to concede: 1) their status as the old Indian owners of the area, and the interest which they must inspire in their claim; 2) a kind of justice to compensate them for the Mission lands which they have lost when these lands should have remained intact”.¹³⁷ Daudier thus insisted that the site of the Arima Mission was “an Indian land, because all the documents subsequent to the Spaniards, in the archives of the government, show this evidence”.¹³⁸ He added: “they cannot deny at least that this land was Indian land or dedicated for use by the Indians”.¹³⁹ Indeed, if we are to believe Daudier, the colonial government quietly concurred: Daudier quotes an unnamed government employee that he says told him, “basically it is certain

¹³² Father Louis Daudier, O.P., parish priest of Arima, Letter to the Monsignor 27 April, 1881.

¹³³ David Wilson, Sub-Intendant of the Commissioners Office, Letter to the Archbishop of Port of Spain 05 March, 1881.

¹³⁴ “Everybody is of the opinion, and knows by tradition, that these lands belong to the Church. But it would be difficult to arrange to have affidavits signed, not only because witnesses are either all dead or infirm, but also because their affidavits would affect some deep-rooted interests”: Father Louis Daudier, O.P., parish priest of Arima, Letter to the Monsignor 20 August, 1873.

¹³⁵ “May I add that the creation of the Mission of Arima is much older than the measure which the English Government took to relegate the Indians of the plains to the heights of Arima and to give them lands there”: Father Louis Daudier, O.P., parish priest of Arima, Letter to the Monsignor 10 March, 1873.

¹³⁶ Daudier, Letter to the Monsignor 27 April, 1881.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

that you have rights, but Government having begun to sell the Mission lands, cannot admit it for, once admitted, you will have the right to demand restitution”.¹⁴⁰

The assertions that the Amerindians of Trinidad fell prey to virtual extinction, and that any contemporary claimants to a Carib identity basically do not know their own identity, are rooted in a colonial invention of tradition.¹⁴¹ The tradition that had been invented can be summarized by this formula: the only “real Caribs” are the “pure Caribs”, and the only “pure Caribs” are now “dead Caribs”. This formula emerged within the colonial scheme for ordering racial groups and their attendant rights and statuses. What it also achieves is the abrupt disconnection between miscegenated offspring and their ancestral lands, merely on the grounds that they are miscegenated, as if phenotypes were any measure of affectivity, self-identification or continued cultural practice. The problem that persists lies in scholars’ adoption of the ideologically motivated truisms of text-based authorities, in place of actual ethnographic information.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in The Invention of Tradition, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

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