

The cacao panyols of Acono

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ACONO is a small village at the foothills of the Northern Range leading to El Tucuche, Trinidad's highest point.

To get to the summit, you must start at Acono.

Historians have written, "It was there in 1805 that English soldiers from Fort Abercromby started their march to defend the town of St Joseph from a perceived attack by the French."

The march turned out to be one of the biggest military faux pas, because it was their own British fleet under Admiral Nelson that the soldiers had sighted.



REMINISCING: Cacao panyol Cynthia Allum, now 75, at her Acono home.

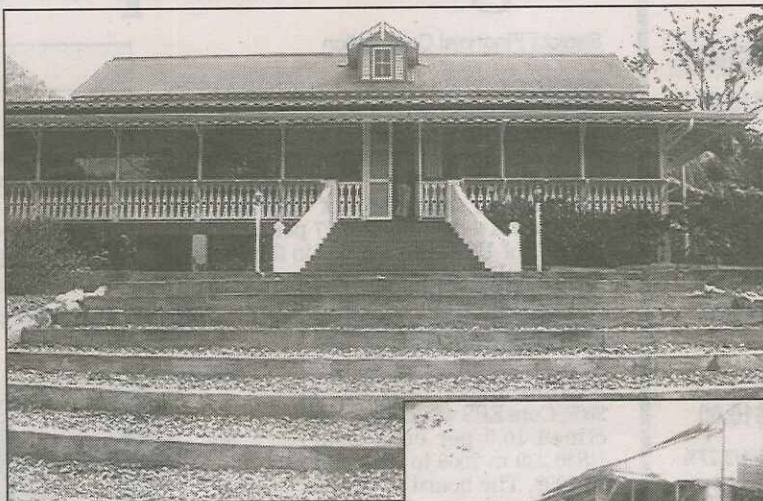
The history of Acono goes back to the time of Amerindians. They, too, had used the village as a point of defence and attack.

El Tucuche is 3,072 feet high and not an easy climb. It is steep and precipitous, but in 1711 a Spanish governor, Don Cristobal de Guzman, climbed to the top of the mountain to see the effect of the lookout. On his way up, he met several Amerindians who acted as guards, history records.

For several years, the Amerindians occupied lands in the nearby Maracas Valley, where they lived in encomiendas and grew provision and tobacco.

Eric Williams, in his "History of the Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago", wrote, "Around 1500 several regions around Trinidad were occupied by different language groups, including the Warao, Arawak, Nepuyo and Caribs."

When cacao became one of the principal crops of Trinidad, they were used by the Spaniards to work on the cacao estates. By 1725, disaster struck the industry and a fungal disease caused the closure of several estates. Production fell and the Indians were forced to leave the estates.



STATELY: The recently renovated Ortinola Great House and, right, a photo of what it used to look like.

Many families at Acono are offspring of the cacao panyols. Among them are the Noriega, Hernandez, Francis, Cedeno, Rodriguez, Reyes and Santana families.

Cynthia Allum, 75, is an offspring of the cacao panyols. She remembers when there were only a few dirt houses at Acono. Pointing to the hills, she said, "There is where they got the cocorite leaves to cover the houses." There are still a few dirt houses at Acono, but these are now covered with galvanise sheeting.

Allum said, "People used to call here Guayamal Road, then they started to call it Calcutta, because the East Indian families had outnumbered the other races."

She said the ethnic composition has changed today.

"Most of the East Indians moved out, some went to St James and St Joseph. Now we have a mix of all the races living here," Allum said.

Allum said a large number of people from Caura also came to live in Acono. Caura is a small village on the other side of the mountain.

"They were living in Caura where they had big gardens and plenty children, but were forced to leave Caura when government decided to construct a dam in that area. They had to scatter all over the place and many of them came



to Acono," she said.

The Caura Dam was a political scandal of the forties, where the people of Caura were disrupted and relocated. The residents prayed that the government would change its mind, but that was not to be. The dam, however, was never completed.

At Acono, the lifestyle has many aspects of Spanish culture. Parang music, preparation of indigenous food, and many of the old Spanish cultural practices are still alive. The use of herbal medicine is also still popular in the village.

But the once-thriving cacao industry is now something of the past. All that is left of the cacao era is the Ortinola Great House which occupies nine acres of undulating grassland at the entrance to the former estate. Created by colonial grant in the late 18th century, the estate was an important supplier of cacao for Cadbury Brothers in England.

The older residents in the village said they had heard of 'Cacao' Bain, Cadbury's estate manager,

who managed the estate in the late 19th century. The Great House is no longer associated with agriculture. It can be rented for weddings and seminars.

The caretaker on the estate said, "It was renovated after years of neglect and now it is the perfect location for retreats, conferences, seminars, celebrations and family reunions."

Not far from the Great House is Frederick Stud Farm, where horses live in air-conditioned stables.

At the highest point in that area, a man by the name of Quenell Morris had constructed a mansion that overlooks vast areas of the Maracas Valley and other parts of Trinidad.

Quarrying on the hills is now a major industry at Acono. Limestone is processed and transported to different construction projects in Trinidad.

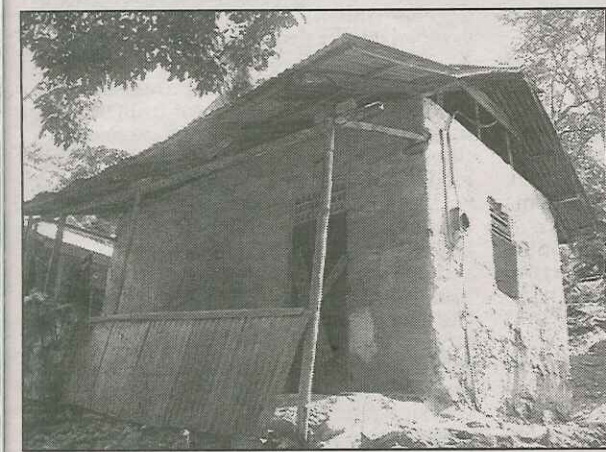
"One member out of every home in Acono is employed in the quarry operations," said Dianne Allum.

She said there have been several changes in the environment over the years. At the lowest point in the valley is the Acono River, which passes through the village at different points.

Allum said, "Long time that river had plenty water now it drying up. People used to wash and bathe in the river but that was in the past."

Acono is one of the areas from which the Maracas waterfall could be accessed. The three major landmarks at Acono are the plantation Great House on the Ortinola Estate, an impressive cross erected at the top of El Tucuche and the Acono River that has dried up.

However, there is a philosophy that guides the destination of the people of Acono. That was expressed by an aged cacao panyol standing at the corner of Acono Road. He told the *Express*, "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery and today is a gift from above."



ANCIENT: One of the dirt houses still standing in the village. —Photos: LOUIS B HOMER

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