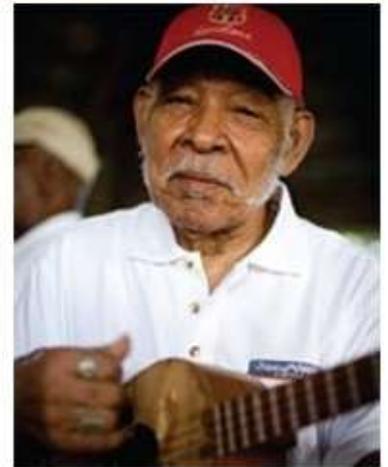




SPANISH

in Trinidad and Tobago

By Dr Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh



Three centuries ago Trinidad was already under Spanish domination for two hundred years. In other words, in 1712, Spain had been sending governors and other administrators to the island for two hundred years to maintain its overseas possession, one of doubtful economic value, but of significant strategic importance.

However, there was no real impact on the development of this potentially rich territory. The non-indigenous Spanish-speaking population in Trinidad remained very small during that period. The Governor in 1702 reported that the total number of inhabitants, that is, Spaniards, did not exceed 60 (probably households).

According to the governor there were also about 1,500 native people on the missions and encomiendas (estates with indigenous labour – see F. Morales Padrón's *Trinidad Española*, Sevilla 2011). In 1712, only a small proportion of the Amerindian population was under Spanish control and in close contact with the Spanish language in four encomiendas located at Arouca, Tacarigua, San Juan, and Caura, in the north of the island. Having been exposed to some degree of indoctrination and Spanish acculturation, these Amerindians of various ethnicities and languages might have learned Spanish and imbibed certain aspects of Hispanic culture.

A hundred years later in 1812, Trinidad had already experienced many profound changes. In 1783 the Cedula of Population had come into effect transforming the demography of the colony, and the nature of its society. Hispanics (whether European, Indigenous or African), were outnumbered by Francophone immigrants of European and African origin. After 1783, the Spanish language and culture already seemed threatened. Then on the 18th February 1797, Trinidad ceased to be Spanish; the last Governor, José María Chacón, handed over the defenceless island to

the British through the capitulation signed at the Valsayn Estate. By the beginning of the 1800s, the exodus of Spanish officials, troops and other colonists was effected. Some of the latter migrated to the Mainland. Other Spanish Creoles “impoverished and isolated”, became unimportant relics in their native land, and “disappeared from the historical record” (see page 20 of B. Brereton’s *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783–1962*). Others, gradually “suffused with French manners”, were absorbed into French Creole society.

Tobago was first sighted by the Spanish in 1498, and recorded Spanish names for the island include Bella Forma, Isla de Asunción, Isla de Concepción and Isla de Magdalena. The Spanish visited or claimed Tobago at various other times, including 1591 and 1614, but they left no real impact on that island. Only a few Spanish place names remain: Cap Gracias-a-Dios and Pedro Point on the northern side and La Guira near Crown Point.

During the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, at a time of political and social turmoil on the Mainland, there was significant movement eastwards to Trinidad. Venezuelans of different political persuasions took up residence on the island. Among them was Antonio Gómez, the Spanish-born secretary of a Venezuelan Royalist General sent as plenipotentiary to the Governor of Trinidad in 1813, and who subsequently performed the role of Assessor to Governor Woodford. Gómez eventually purchased the large La Pastora Cocoa Estate in the Santa Cruz valley, and settled down in Trinidad (see pages 82–83 of Fr. Anthony de Verteuil’s *Great Estates of Trinidad*).

Edward Lanzer (E.L.) Joseph, author of *Warner Arundell, the Adventures of a Creole*, comments, through the protagonist, on the “dialects” of the people of the Port-of-Spain of the 19th century. Arundell claims that one could hear “Spanish, with its true Castilian pronunciation, as well as with the slight corruption with which the South Americans speak it”. Evidently the speech of the Trinidad-born Hispanics would have been the slightly “corrupted” (sic) variety. In addition, we know that droves of labourers or peons arrived from Venezuela throughout the nineteenth century settling mostly in agricultural areas. In this way, though we witness the demise of its more socially influential members, we observe how the Hispanic community continued to survive and grow. Therefore, Spanish remained extant as the language of local Hispanic folk particularly in rural areas.

In the 1880s, Louis de Verteuil reported a predominance of Spanish speakers of mixed race in the county of Caroni. The ward of Montserrat, in particular, “was mostly if not entirely occupied by individuals of Spanish descent” wrote de Verteuil. In the Caura Valley, most of the inhabitants were of Spanish descent, and Spanish was universally spoken. However, I have not found records of the actual number of Spanish-speaking persons residing in Trinidad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The term ‘Spanish’ was used to designate persons whose language was Spanish, and not necessarily to refer to descendants of families from the Spanish colonial period. Venezuelan Spanish speakers were considered valuable pioneers in the development of Trinidad’s cacao industry. There were tree fellers and hunters, but businessmen and professionals also came, all fleeing from the civil unrest on the mainland. The peons gravitated to areas where Spanish speaking communities already existed.

Consequently, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the local ‘Spanish’ population consisted largely of both the rural agricultural labourer/peasant type and the more urban Venezuelan.

After the closure of the Spanish Colony, the Venezuelans and their locally born descendants took on the responsibility, so to speak, of ensuring that Trinidad did not lose its Hispanic flavour altogether. Since most of these Spanish speakers worked on cocoa estates they were often referred to as “cocoa panyols”. Language, customs, occupation and even place of residence distinguished them from the rest of the society. They often looked different too: mainly of mixed Amerindian, European and African ancestry. They were referred to politely as Spanish, and often derogatorily as cocoa panyol.

Throughout the early to mid 20th century, Port-of-Spain and other Caribbean capitals had become the point of reference for many Parianos (inhabitants of the coast of the Gulf of Paria on the Venezuelan side, in towns such as Macuro and Güiría), with wealthy Venezuelans sending their children to Catholic colleges in Trinidad, conducting business in Trinidad, shopping, and even coming to take drinking water back to the mainland. Carúpano, further west, was also important in Venezuelan- Antillean commerce. Spanish, Patois and English moved freely between the two countries. There have been several other waves of Venezuelans coming to Trinidad, mostly depending on the political era, as well as economic opportunities such as fishing, commerce and other business activities.

The variety of Spanish spoken in Trinidad during the Spanish colonial period could hardly have differed from the language of the region generally, Venezuela in particular. Moreover, the conditions were not present for the creation of a new Spanish-based pidgin, bozal or distinct language like the French-lexicon Creole (Patois) and English-lexicon Creole languages. Enslaved Africans were introduced into Spanish Trinidad at a very late stage, they were small in number and, to my knowledge, there were no maroon settlements during that period. Therefore, they were not separated from mainstream Spanish. Local expressions used by Trinidadian Spanish Creoles or hispanicised Amerindians and their offspring in the pre-British era have not been identified. Neither is there information on their songs, music, food, festivities, prayers and knowledge of medicinal plants.



Stollmeyer Cocoa Estate House, Santa Cruz Valley

Between 1967 and 1987, I interacted with ‘Spanish’ speakers in traditional Spanish villages which were becoming very mixed with a diminishing core of Spanish speakers. These communities include Lopinot, Santa Cruz, Maracas, Blanchisseuse, Arima, Valencia, Las Cuevas in the north, places to which many of the Spanish speakers had migrated from Caura, the former quintessential Spanish valley (until the 1945 evacuation). Further south, I met Spanish speakers in Gran Couva, Cedros, Erin, the central

Montserrat Hills, Moruga, Rio Claro, Siparia, Tamana, Tabaquite, Tortuga, and the southwestern peninsula (see S. Moodie- Kublalsingh’s 1994 work, *The Cocoa Panyols of Trinidad: An Oral Record*). Most informants reported that

their ancestors were of both Trinidadian and Venezuelan provenance. These persons were generally in their seventies. The younger generation was unable to carry on a conversation in Spanish.

Yet, today in 2012, there are Trinidadians who are still described as ‘Spanish’ mainly because of their appearance and their surnames; because of some family member’s knowledge of Spanish, or because they reside in traditional ‘Spanish’ villages where parang has been popular. Formerly, some of these individuals were reputed to cure illnesses and assist with personal problems through the recitation of Spanish prayers. Their help was solicited at critical times to santiguar (santiwa), attend to children afflicted with mysterious ailments, advise on local bush medicine, and so on. Moreover, in post-colonial independent Trinidad and Tobago, a new, positive attitude evolved vis à vis their musical talent and linguistic abilities. They were consulted as repositories of Hispanic song and music, namely the popular parang (from Spanish parranda). The status lost by the old Spanish Creoles was partially recovered by their obscure, unknown descendants and by humble, rural, Trinidadian-Venezuelan peons.

Trinidadian Spanish spoken two generations ago in rural areas was similar to the variety heard in rural Eastern (Oriente de) Venezuela. In 1922 and 1931, the celebrated Hispanic philologist, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, after visiting Trinidad, reported that our variety (dialect) of Spanish was ‘normal’, which contained some loans from English and Patois. This mixture distinguished it from other varieties. (See R.W. Thompson’s 1956 article “Préstanos lingüísticos en tres idiomas trinitarios” in *Estudios americanos* 61: 249-54.)

Trinidadian English also benefitted from its contact with Spanish. Apart from the Spanish place names and surnames that abound in our country, we use words that are of local Spanish origin. Amerindian place names of various origins and languages have been influenced by Spanish with suffixes such as –al, -ito/-ita, articles such as el/los, la(s), and words such as grande, chico, río, cerro and more. Panyol/ Payol, pastelle and parang have their origin in español, pastel and parranda, respectively. Our expression it making hot might be a calque of the Spanish hace calor. (It can also be due to French and Patois influence.) Other words currently in use are: arape (>arepa, ‘fried cornmeal pie with fish or meat filling’), empanada (‘a cornmeal pie usually without filling’); pastelle (>pastel, ‘a corn pie filled with a well-seasoned mixture of meat, raisins, capers and olives’); lanyap/lagniappe (>la ñapa, ‘an extra bonus’); to mamaguy (>mamar el gallo, also used in Venezuela, ‘to fool, trick, deceive’); picong (>icón, ‘spontaneous verbal battler’); douen/dwenn (>duende, ‘a legendary creature, spirit of an infant who died before being baptised’); maljo (>mal de ojo, ‘the evil eye’); sapat (>zapato, ‘slipper with wooden sole for outdoor use’); planass (>planazo, ‘a blow with the flat side of a machete or cutlass’); pokapok (>poco a poco, ‘little by little, gradually’); ayo as in ‘the kite ayo’ (>adios, ‘goodbye’); pyong (>peón, ‘an enthusiast’); cuatro, bandol and mandolin, musical instruments; and several other culture-bound words associated with the parang, for example, aguinaldo, estribillo, joropo, manzanare, parranderos, serenal, etc. Some words are now obsolete: boy (>bollo, ‘bun or bread roll’); marcha palantay (>marcha para adelante, ‘to go ahead’); santiwa(i) (>santiguar, ‘to bless’); and others. (See Winer and Aguilar, and John Jacob Thomas’ 1869 book, *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar*.)

The old” panyols” prayed, recited proverbs and sang verses of aguinaldos and estribillos in Spanish. The language was usually transmitted orally. Those who were literate read *La Santa Biblia* and a book called “*El Mártir de Gólgota*” which they consulted to compose verses on the life of Jesus. The younger generations also lost their

forefathers' oraciones ('prayers'), regarded as powerful spiritual tools veiled in secrecy and revealed to the privileged few. Most of the oraciones were in verse and took the form of the romance or ballad. These prayers and numerous coplas on religious and secular themes connect Trinidad to Spain via Venezuela. From this point of view, one can appreciate how Trinidad and Venezuela, especially Paria and Oriente de Venezuela, form Un Solo Pueblo (One People) sharing Una sola cultura (One Culture), as anthropologist Juan Sorrillo is fond of reminding us. This Hispanic Venezuelan ribbon is just one of the many that are woven into Trinidad's culture.

Unfortunately, we have been witnessing the phenomenon of language death as the national native variety has become extinct. The few semi-speakers of the local variety produce ill-formed and idiosyncratic syntax which the older fluent generations would not have generated, and their vocabulary is limited. Languages die when they are no longer used by the younger generation. Today, we have reached this stage where there are very few, if any, surviving speakers of Trinidad Spanish. Spanish has evolved into a Foreign Language taught at secondary schools and a few language learning institutions.

Did you know?

- The Cabildo was built after 1797 in "Spanish" style. No building from the Spanish period survives.
- The name Laventille has its origins in the Spanish word for an 'inn', La Ventilla (from la venta), as there was actually an inn on the outskirts of Port-of-Spain.
- The streets in downtown Port-of-Spain from Duncan Street in the east to Frederick Street in the west first bore Spanish names: Calle del Infante, Calle de San José, Calle de Santa Ana, Calle Herrera, Calle de San Carlos, Calle de San Luis, Calle de Santa Rosa, Calle de Princesa de Asturias.
- Observatory Street was so called because it is the site of an astronomer's observatory built in the Spanish colonial period.
- Port-of-Spain was first named Puerto de los Españoles.
- The surname Farfan is one of the oldest Spanish and European names in Trinidad. It dates back to at least 1644.
- Devotion to La Divina Pastora was introduced by Spanish Capuchin missionaries who first arrived in Trinidad from Aragon and Catalonia in 1684.
- Trinidad and Venezuela were part of the Viceroyalty of New Granada from 1717. This viceroyalty included Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, and Panama. By 1777, Trinidad was one of the provinces of the Captaincy-General of Venezuela

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