RACE RELATIONS

IN

COLONIAL TRINIDAD
1870–1900

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of society and race
relations in Trinidad in the last three decades of the nineteenth century,
with special reference to the white, coloured, and black groups. These
thirty years saw few striking or momentous events. They were not
obviously formative years, as were the three decades after 1838, when the
ex-slaves entered the society as free men, and when new ethnic groups
were coming in to make the population even more heterogeneous. No
major political changes took place, although there were important shifts in
the economy, with a marked expansion of the cocoa industry, the develop-
ment of cane-farming, and considerable diversification. By 1870, Trinidad
had become nearly as cosmopolitan as it was a century later: no new
national or ethnic group came in after that date, with the exception of the
Syrio-Lebanese. Yet these last years of the century, peaceful and unevent-
ful as they seem, were important for the evolution of the society. Trinidad
was a Crown Colony; the white elite was a powerful influence on policy-
making and administration; it controlled much of the economy; but
gradually a non-white middle class was emerging, augmented from below.
This development will be a crucial theme of this study, for it was the
coloured and black middle class which began to articulate a 'national'
ideology, and which held the key to the political and social future of
Trinidad.

Our study focuses on Creole society in Trinidad in the later nineteenth
century. Contemporary Trinidadians understood Creole society to include
people of European and African descent, and all those of mixed descent,
but to exclude the Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants. This is also the
interpretation of modern social scientists. M. G. Smith defines Creole
society in the West Indies as consisting of 'native West Indians of Euro-
pean, African, or mixed descent. The Creole society and culture derive
from Europe and Africa...Expressed in terms of colour, Creoles form a
trinity of black, white and brown.'[1] Edward Brathwaite, writing of
Jamaica, believes that people from Britain and West Africa 'contributed to
the formation of a society which developed its own distinctive character or
culture which, in so far as it was neither purely British nor West African,

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is called "creole" '.[2] Creole society in the West Indies, therefore, involved
two cultural traditions, the African and the European. It presupposed a
colonial situation, a multi-racial society, and cultural pluralism to a
greater or lesser degree. Because the European segment was the dominant
one, the forms of institutional life were based on European models, how-
ever much they may have diverged from those models, and African
traditions were given low prestige in comparison with those derived from
Europe.

In Trinidad, however, the large-scale immigration of Indians after 1845
significantly changed the composition of the island's population; by 1870
Indians comprised about a quarter of the total population. Yet it is true to
say that, until the twentieth century, the Indians remained marginal to
Creole society. For many decades after their initial arrival, they were
viewed as a group of migrant labourers, birds of passage, who would not
remain to form a permanent part of the population. Even when, after the
1870s, it became clear that substantial numbers had chosen to settle
permanently, the Indians remained largely outside the Creole society.
They showed no desire to play a wider part in the island society, and
mostly abstained from Creole activities, apparently satisfied with the
traditional values of their own culture. The process of creolisation had
hardly begun to affect large numbers of Indians before the turn of the
century; Indians were difficult to locate in the Creole colour hierarchy,
being neither black nor white.[3] In considering the nature of race relations
in late nineteenth-century Trinidad, therefore, we will be primarily con-
cerned with the interaction between whites, coloureds, and blacks, people
of European, African and mixed descent: Creole society, in fact. Yet the
size of the Indian population, and its crucial importance for the economic
and social development of Trinidad, make it essential to investigate the
position of the Indians in the last decades of the century, and to consider,
however briefly, their interaction with the other segments of the island
society.[4]

It is essential to define clearly some terms which will be used constantly
in this study. The word 'coloured' will be used to describe an individual
of mixed European and African descent, probably light-complexioned. A
'black' is understood to be a person of unmixed African descent, or pre-
dominantly African descent, whose complexion is dark. 'African' is used
only to describe persons born in Africa.

'Creole' is a word which has accumulated many meanings. In the later
nineteenth century, it meant a person born in Trinidad of European
and/or African descent. This would be the most usual interpretation when
the word was used without any qualifying adjective. A 'white Creole'
was a person born in the island of European descent; a 'Creole Indian'
was born in Trinidad of East Indian descent; a 'Creole Spaniard' was an

individual of Spanish (and often African and Amerindian) descent born in the island. The phrase 'foreign Creole' was often applied to coloured and black persons born in one of the other West Indian islands and settled in Trinidad. And 'Afro-Creole' is used to describe cultural practices which fused African and European elements, and were kept up by black Creoles in Trinidad.

'French Creole' is used in the sense in which it was understood in the nineteenth century. A 'French Creole' was a person of European descent, usually French, but also Spanish, Irish, English, Corsican and even German, who was born in the island and who considered himself, and was considered by others, to be a member of the French Creole group. He might possibly have ancestors of African descent, but in order to be accepted as a member of this group, he would have to be regarded as of 'pure white' descent. Sometimes people not actually born in Trinidad, but possessing the other necessary criteria, were 'adopted' as French Creoles. The term 'English Creole' means a person born in Trinidad of English descent, with no acknowledged non-white ancestors.

The problems historians encounter, in defining terms like these, point to the difficulties in analysing the interaction of races and classes in a complex West Indian society of a century ago. By about 1870 a pattern of race relations and attitudes had become established, which would not be significantly changed until, perhaps, the 1930s. An investigation of race relations in our period, therefore, provides the historical foundations essential for the study of contemporary Trinidad society. Yet the difficulties are formidable. It is always easier for the historian to find evidence of acts of racial discrimination, or what was considered to be such, than to trace the ideas and prejudices which lay behind the actions. One can establish the grievances of particular groups, and note the reports of race 'incidents' which were dramatic enough to be publicised. But the nuances of manner and behaviour are not recorded, and these were always of great importance to the group which felt itself to be discriminated against. Yet we have to proceed on the assumption that it is possible to ascertain – however inadequately – the attitudes and beliefs of people now dead, and especially their attitudes towards race, colour, class, and other groups in the society. They can be ascertained through written expressions in books and articles, in the press, in private letters, in official documents, and through activities which were a practical manifestation of such attitudes.

This is far more difficult, of course, in the case of people who have left few or no written records of their own. Yet some picture of the world of the masses can be obtained: from accounts of their activities and beliefs by people of another class (here we must allow, when necessary, for ignorance, misunderstanding, or hostility); from non-literary records now transcribed, such as folklore; from official records which deal with the

activities of working-class Creoles, especially records of the law courts and the police, dealing with (for instance) obeah, band rivalry, Afro-Creole music and dance; and from the rare written accounts left by members, or ex-members, of the group. What the historian must not do is to attribute to the black masses of Trinidad in the 1870s the beliefs, prejudices and attitudes of their descendants a century later, and this is just as true of the other groups in the society. Nor is it possible, from another viewpoint, to assume that white, coloured and black people in 1870 had a set of values and attitudes identical to those held during the period of slavery, although the prejudices built up during that time would prove extremely durable.

During the generations after emancipation, Trinidad was clearly a segmented society, made up of different sectors or segments, divided primarily by national origin and race, but also by education and economic position. The members of these segments interacted on some levels and in some areas of economic and social life, but they thought of themselves as belonging primarily to a separate and self-contained group. The segments formed a hierarchy, with one clearly dominant, the others clearly sub-ordinate (ranked roughly in descending order). One segment, the whites, controlled the machinery of law and law enforcement, politics and adminis-tration. Colour played a prominent part in determining the status of the different segments, a characteristic of multi-racial societies, and cultural pluralism was also a distinctive feature of Trinidad society. Institutional differences which indicated this cultural pluralism related to marriage and family life, education, attitudes to property and money, economic institutions, religion, language, music, dance and song, and folklore. There were considerable differences in most of these areas between the dominant whites, the coloured and black middle class, and the black masses, who together constituted Creole society; the cultural differences between each of the 'Creole' segments and the East Indians were even greater. Further, as in most culturally plural societies, the dominant segment attempted to impose its cultural system, or selected aspects of it, on the other groups.[5]

It has therefore been found useful, in this study, to accept the idea of a dominant culture coexisting with a subordinate sub-culture which belonged to the Creole masses. For the lines dividing the sectors of society were not only lines of race, colour, or wealth; just as important was the ability to command the dominant culture, which was European culture. But the society was still more complex; the white elite in Trinidad consisted of two leading groups, the French Creoles, and the English Creoles in alliance with British residents, and the two did not necessarily share the same cultural complex. The English Creoles and the British residents mostly represented middle-class, urban, mid-Victorian culture. There was

a set of fairly rigid values: for example, the virtue of industry and thrift, the sanctity of class lines and property, the belief in science and progress, the importance of legal and Christian marriage, the subordinate position of women, the conviction that Britain was the most enlightened and successful nation the world had ever seen, and others. The French Creoles, however, while sharing some aspects of this complex of values, tended to cherish others which belonged to Europe before the great revolutions. France, not Britain, was their point of reference; but not 'modern' France as much as France of the Ancien Régime, for the leading French Creoles always remembered their ancestors' attachment to the royalist cause, and they prided themselves, not always justifiably, on their descent from the old nobility. Catholic in religion, aristocratic in outlook, the French Creoles were a landed class whose economic base was the ownership of plantations. As slave-owners they had generally established closer, more paternalistic relations with their slaves than the English planters, and their influence over the Creole masses in the nineteenth century was certainly stronger. The traditional life-style of the French Creole planters, in which lavish hospitality and entertainments were a mark of status, was another difference. The dominant culture of nineteenth-century Trinidad, therefore, was European and Christian; but it included both British and French elements, and it represented values which were middle-class and urban as well as landed and aristocratic. It seems clear that by the later nineteenth century these elements had, to a considerable extent, fused together as the French Creoles became less 'French' and more 'British'. In any case, the dominant culture was the 'property' of the whites. They were of British or French descent; they grew up familiar with the English (and French) language and with European literary culture; they could pay for the kind of education which disseminated it.

For the group which we call the coloured and black middle class, command of European culture was the essential qualification for membership, rather than wealth or lightness of complexion. Few members of this group were even moderately prosperous; quite a few were black, not coloured. But they all aspired to European culture. In fact it was their boast that they were more 'cultured' than the whites, whom they dismissed as being for the most part crassly materialistic and commercially minded. Hence the pride when a member of this group was recognised in Britain for his scholarly or literary attainments. The cultural gap between this group and the ordinary Creole peasant or labourer was very wide. Yet it would not be true to say that the black and coloured middle class uniformly rejected its African heritage and sought only to identify with the whites and their culture. The members of this class, in Trinidad around 1870, were proud on the one hand of their command of the dominant culture; on the other hand many of them stressed race consciousness, often with the idea that

their cultural attainments 'disproved' the theory of the innate mental inferiority of the African race.

How far did the Creole masses command this culture? Most were illiterate. Many spoke only patois or Spanish; in general the language of the Creole masses was patois. Most of the values of Victorian middle-class culture were alien to them, especially the notions about marriage and the position of women. Probably they were closer to the French Creoles, with whom they shared the patois, Creole folklore and folksongs, and French-derived dances, costumes and cuisine. But the harsh physical conditions of their lives, their precarious economic position, the isolation of many rural settlements, precluded them from familiarity with domestic comforts or amenities, books, pictures, or newspapers. Their experience of seasonal employment and unemployment, low wages and arbitrary employers, hardly made them receptive to the cherished Victorian idea that the supreme virtues in the lower class were industry and thrift. The Creole masses created, and belonged to, an Afro-Creole subordinate culture. African elements were reinforced by liberated Africans who arrived in Trinidad as late as 1861. Some African groups managed to carry on many of their accustomed cultural activities. Creole blacks as a whole found their deepest expression in cultural forms which were wholly or partly of African origin: the dance, drumming and other types of music, wakes and stick-fighting. In religion most were Roman Catholics, but African-derived cults were influential, and Afro-Christian sects of the 'Shouter' type had appeared by 1870.

The world of the black peasant and labourer, and the world of the educated person of whatever colour, were different enough to enable us to speak of a dominant minority culture and a subordinate mass culture. Yet we must, obviously, recognise the many and complex ways in which the two worlds met. Some of the black working class were literate, many must have spoken 'good' English, gone regularly to orthodox churches and paid their church dues, belonged to Friendly Societies, looked up to legal marriage as the ideal even if they could not afford it, and scrimped and saved to give their children an education. And the Creole upper and middle classes, white and coloured – especially the French Creoles – absorbed much of the subordinate culture through their intimate contacts since infancy with black domestics and labourers. Respectable, even wealthy persons were said to visit the obeahmen; upper-class men violated the Victorian sexual code by taking black or coloured mistresses and fathering illegitimate families. The white French Creoles shared with the rural masses a whole world of folklore and folk beliefs. The dichotomy of a dominant elite culture and a subordinate mass culture was never rigid, yet it provides a useful framework for a study of this nature.

In order to organise the material, the division of Creole society into

three broad sectors, a white upper class, a coloured and black middle class, and the Creole masses, has been accepted. Not all whites in 1870 were wealthy or educated, nor did they all follow the same activities or share the same values. Yet it is surely possible to think of the whites as a dominant class, whose characteristic economic activities were planting, commerce, and the professions, who were on the whole prosperous in comparison with the other sectors, who were familiar with European culture, who dominated the political life of the colony as well as its economic and social life. Despite the divisions of national origin and religion, the white Creoles and British residents formed a ruling class.

A few of the coloured and black middle class were wealthier than most whites, and were descended from free coloured planters and slave-owners who settled in Trinidad in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; these were coloured rather than black. Other members were relatively penniless, the descendants of ex-slaves or liberated Africans, often ill-paid school teachers or civil servants who had entered the middle class largely through education. They formed a distinct group, distinguished from the whites by their African descent, and from the Creole masses by their education and their 'white-collar' jobs.

The black masses were very far from being a homogeneous group. They included people of very different origins, Creole Trinidadians, British West Indian immigrants, natives of Africa, Spanish-speaking immigrants from Venezuela. It is difficult to argue that they shared a common Creole culture, although many elements of that culture were absorbed gradually by the immigrants from the eastern Caribbean, Africa, and Venezuela. We know that there were substantial cultural differences between the Creole blacks and the Barbadians in Trinidad, and that many of the African immigrants remained largely outside the life of Creole society, as was true of the more isolated descendants of the Venezuelan immigrants. Only in the most general sense can we accept the black masses as a single sector of the population: they were in a precarious economic condition, they were near the bottom of the ethnic and social scale, they were excluded from political and civic life, many of their cherished values and cultural forms were despised by the upper groups. Further, the Creole culture of the nuclear group, the descendants of the Trinidad ex-slaves, gradually spread in varying degrees to the newcomers. For all the difficulties, the division of Creole society into three broad sectors, like the concept of the dominant culture and the subordinate culture, is a useful organisational framework for this study.

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. Its population was never more than a few hundred Spaniards and blacks, and a few thousand indigenous Indians. The society was formed in the decades after the Cedula of Population (1783) which encouraged the settlement of French planters.

At first French planters (both white and coloured) left the French islands and British Grenada, because Trinidad offered unparalleled opportunities for the acquisition of fresh land. After 1789, French planters and free people of colour fled the Revolution in the French islands; they included people of diverse political sympathies forced to leave their homes as the fortunes of war and revolution fluctuated. By the time of the British conquest in 1797, the majority of Trinidad's free population was French-speaking and of French origin, and Trinidad possessed an unusually large free coloured class, considerably outnumbering the whites. In 1802, there were about 5,275 free coloureds in comparison with 2,261 whites.[6]

A second element in the society consisted of immigrants from Venezuela. Some of them left the mainland for political reasons, finding Trinidad a convenient refuge from the revolutionary warfare which raged from 1810. The refugees spoke French as well as Spanish, for some Frenchmen had fled the West Indies for the Main, only to re-emigrate to Trinidad. A much larger immigration was of 'peons' – labourers and backwoodsmen of mixed Spanish–Amerindian–African descent – who came all through the century in search of jobs and land. The peons, and the more prosperous Venezuelan immigrants, formed a considerable Spanish-speaking community in many parts of the island, reinforcing the dwindling numbers of indigenous Hispanised Amerindians.

With the formal cession to Britain in 1802, a small but highly influential group of people from the British Isles settled in Trinidad. British or Creole planters from the older colonies flocked to the still underdeveloped island, eager to exploit its virgin lands. With them came their slaves, mainly English-speaking. British merchants settled after 1802 to establish the island's leading commercial houses. Scots, Irishmen, and Englishmen came as overseers and managers of estates, or as clerks in the business houses, or to posts in the civil service and professional practices.

At the time of emancipation in 1838, about 20,656 apprentices were set free.[7] Most of these spoke patois and were nominally Roman Catholics. A smaller group, who had come with their owners from the British Caribbean, were English-speaking and nominally Protestant. The majority of the Trinidad slaves were West Indian born by 1834, but a minority were natives of Africa, and at least one tribal group, the Mandingoes, managed to retain a sense of religious and tribal solidarity in the 1830s.

The free coloureds and free blacks were unusually numerous in Trini-

dad, consisting of roughly 12,000 people in 1838.[8] The size and economic importance of this group were to be significant in forming the island's social structure. They ranged from prosperous and educated planters, slave-owners, and professionals to illiterate peons and free black artisans or hucksters. A group of demobilised black soldiers of the West India Regiment had been settled after 1815 in villages at Manzanilla on the east coast and in other settlements nearby. At about the same time, former members of the Corps of Colonial Marines, who were escaped slaves in the United States who had fought for Britain in the 1812–14 war, were settled in seven 'company villages' in southern Trinidad. These were the 'Americans'. There were also manumitted slaves, as well as many more prosperous planters, smallholders and shopkeepers, whose families had been free for one or more generations. The elite group among the large free coloured community consisted of the French free coloured planters and professionals.

This was the society at the time of emancipation. In the thirty years or so after 1838, two things happened. First, the former slaves and their former owners adjusted in various ways to the new state of freedom. Secondly, entirely new ethnic and national groups entered the society, so that 'a population already rich and diverse in its composition, became even more so in the short space of fifteen years (1845–60) during which it took on its present intricate racial structure'.[9]

The ex-slaves, for the most part, continued to give at least part-time labour to the sugar estates. But large numbers of them ceased to reside on the estates. In the 1840s they founded new villages along the lines of the main roads and in areas adjacent to existing estates. Thus there grew up the ribbon development along the eastern main road between Port of Spain and Arima, and the new suburbs of Port of Spain and San Fernando. Little is known about the organisation of the Creole ex-slaves in these new villages. Perhaps tribal links, or the sharing of a common African language, or past association as slaves on the same estate, contributed to the establishment of the villages. Many of the ex-slaves, and most of the peons, settled as squatters and small cultivators in the interior, especially in the valleys of the Northern Range and in the Montserrat hills. Empty land was there for the taking, and squatting was not effectively dealt with until the late 1860s. The squatters, it was felt, had opted out of civilisation by going to live in areas unreached by the law, the schools, and the churches.

The planters were convinced, by 1840, of the necessity, if the sugar estates were to survive, of bringing in new types of people and of anchoring them on the estates by some system of coercion. The years after 1840, therefore, saw many different types of immigration into the island. Trinidad's black population was supplemented from two sources. There

was a large, spontaneous, and steady influx of immigrants from the eastern Caribbean, nearly all of African descent, attracted by high wages, and the relative availability of land and jobs. And there was an important immigration of freed Africans between 1841 and 1861.

These were Africans found in foreign slaveships which had been seized by the British Navy, liberated, and sent to Sierra Leone or to St Helena, from which places they opted to emigrate to Trinidad. Most of them had just been rescued from the slaveships, or had been liberated only a short time before they emigrated. They spoke no English; they were 'pagans retaining the full vigour of their tribal customs. . .they were for the West Indies a throwback to those who had been transported to the British islands before. . .1807'. Between 1841 and 1861, when African immigration to Trinidad ended, a total of 3,383 had emigrated from Sierra Leone and 3,198 from St Helena.[10] With their tribal marks and their un-Western clothes, they were quite unlike the Creoles, and they tended to congregate in tribal groups after they left the estates, forming tribal-based villages and keeping up their languages and customs.

The white population was augmented after 1840 by two main streams. There was a continuing influx of Britons coming to civil service posts, professional jobs, or managerial positions on the sugar estates. And between 1846 and 1847 about 1,298 Portuguese Madeirans settled in Trinidad, both Catholics and Presbyterians. Though the Madeirans proved a failure as plantation labourers, they soon became highly successful market gardeners and shopkeepers.

By far the most important immigration into Trinidad after 1840 was that of East Indians as indentured labourers for the sugar estates. Indentured immigration to Trinidad began in 1845 and continued until 1848, when the financial crisis of that year temporarily ended it. In 1851 it was reopened, and from then until 1917, Indians arrived each year under the indenture system. Approximately 134,183 immigrants came to Trinidad during the whole period. By 1871 Indians formed over twenty-five per cent of the population. Because of their numbers alone, the Indians were the most significant addition to the population in the period after 1845. Their significance also lies in the fact that they came from a highly developed society, with ancient religious and cultural traditions, traditions essentially alien to those of Trinidad, where a European minority dominated an African majority. They were an entirely new and immensely complex element in the society.

A century after the Cedula of Population, the intricate society of Trinidad had been firmly established. Its nucleus consisted of white, coloured, and black Creoles. To this core had been added, after emancipation, immigrants from Africa, Madeira, Europe, including Britain, Venezuela, the eastern Caribbean, China, and India. It was almost inevitably a

segmented society, divided, as one contemporary put it, into 'several hostile camps'.[11] But before we attempt to analyse the nature of this society, we need to examine the environment – demographic, economic, and political – in which nineteenth-century Trinidadians lived.