

REVIVING CARIBS:

Recognition, Patronage and Ceremonial Indigeneity in Trinidad and Tobago

By Maximilian C. Forte



THE RESURGENCE and reorganization of the Santa Rosa Carib Community (SRCC) in the city of Arima, Trinidad, raises certain contentious issues where reconciliation and self-determination are concerned, not least of which is the problem of how to define "Indigenous" in Trinidad. In various academic disciplines one finds writers who have long spoken in terms of a total dearth of indigeneity in the Caribbean and Trinidad. This presumption even extends to asserting the extinction of Amerindians. Virtually no analyst, therefore, ever entertained the extent to which Amerindian societies may have contributed to the making of post-Conquest Trinidad, or Caribbean society and culture (Forte 1996). By the 1990s however, many of these small surviving Amerindian communities, and newly formed organizations identifying with an Amerindian heritage, became far more visible and assertive. The SRCC is one example. This very small organization consisting of no more than 30 individuals related by blood or marriage, proclaims a Carib ancestry and traces its origins as a group to the foundation in Arima of the Roman Catholic Mission of Santa Rosa in the late 1700s. The Mission consisted of an agglomeration of tribal remnants relocated there by the last Spanish governor in order to make way for the influx of French Caribbean planters and their slaves, who would transform Trinidad into a sugar exporting economy.

Strictly speaking, Trinidad's aboriginals were never defeated in any war, nor were treaties ever signed, nor did they become extinct. Their numbers were drastically minimized, their lands usurped, their labor bought and sold, and they were intensely assimilated into Hispanic, Catholic and even urban society. Today, the leaders of the island's only Carib Community stress that they have lost many of their traditions, their language, and their religious beliefs and never received any communal lands when the Mission was dismantled. On the other hand, the SRCC shuns any kind of Indigenous political militancy, recriminations, or even demand for lands as a right. They do not engage in protests or speak out on issues of social justice. What has developed then is a case of reconciliation without self-determination, that is, paternal state recognition and the "ceremonializing" of Trinidad's Amerindians.

Maximilian Forte (mcforte@hotmail.com), a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at University of Adelaide (Australia), has completed 21 months of fieldwork in Trinidad's Amerindian descendants and their organizations, and is founding ed. of the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink.

Arima has long based its claims to a special identity in Trinidad on its Spanish-Amerindian background, as the site of Trinidad's last Mission. The Santa Rosa Festival, which emerged from this Mission history, has long been celebrated in Trinidad's only Royal Chartered Borough. Historically, at least as far as is known this century, the Caribs were responsible for the main preparatory work and ornamentation for this festival, celebrated each year on August 23. The Queen of the Caribs, a matriarch elected in part for her knowledge of traditions, was in charge of coordinating overall efforts for the festival while a King elected for the year oversaw the men's work (i.e. cutting bamboo, wood poles and timite palms, and cleaning the cemetery). A division of labor emerged between the Carib families and the Church; hence the Caribs acquired a ceremonial-based public identity subject to patronage by both the Church and the Colonial state. Indeed, Sir Ralph Woodford, an early British governor of Trinidad, was a regular patron of the festival. Lord Harris, another governor, developed a special paternal relationship with the Caribs, who in turn named the park in front of the Church 'Lord Harris Square' (There are no other Arima landmarks named by the Amerindians). Governor Hollis initiated in this century the tradition of providing funds to the Queen, (Maria Werges), so that she could prepare a special lunch reception for the governor and his party after the High Mass on the Grand Festival day (while the members of the community gathered behind the Queen's home). Along with Parang music (Christmas and Easter music sung in Spanish), making cassava bread and farine, weaving terite, constructing ajoupas and tapia homes, hunting and herbal medicinal traditions, the Santa Rosa Festival forms part of the Caribs cultural and symbolic repertoire.

REBIRTH AND THE RETURNING NATIVE

Ricardo Bharath (Hernandez) returned in 1973 from living in Detroit as a young man. He explains that he longed to be back home and thought of entering the priesthood until he learned that he could not be guaranteed a position as parish priest in Arima. Bharath had very fond childhood memories of the festival and wished to maintain and develop it further. For the leader of the SRCC, the festival is what "holds the community together," making their Carib identity public. It is through the Santa Rosa Festival that SRCC members trace their heritage back to the Mission and hence to its Indigenous Carib members.

Bharath emphasizes that he returned to Trinidad without any knowledge of his or Arima's Amerindian history, and that his sole motivation to action was the preservation of the Santa Rosa Festival. It was not, at that point, an Amerindian ethnic revival. Bharath found the festival in disarray and decline — in terms of numbers of participants and quality of preparation (not all the elders agree with him on this point however). He needed a central meeting place to gather everyone to make plans for the festival and no private home proved satisfactory to all the members. Hence, in such a simple way, the quest for land began.

This search for land took on added importance in relatively short order. Bharath claims that in talking with elders he learned that much of what he took for granted was Amerindian in origin (i.e. cassava bread, weaving) and that only the Caribs prepared the festival each year. While the Caribs lived on Calvary Hill in Arima, the Church displaced some Carib families in the construction of Holy Cross College. Bharath wished to have a single communal residential area for the traditional Carib families who bear surnames such as Calderon, Hernandez, Campo, and Lopez. As Bharath discovered his Amerindian background, he began to argue that, "Indigenous peoples need land in order to survive." The Church granted them use of an area of land behind Santa Rosa Cemetery, approximately the size of two average North American suburban residential blocks. However, one member of the community, reviled by many, apparently sold plots to many non-Caribs. This area, known as Jonestown (basically a ghetto in central Arima) is now largely non-Carib and occupied by dozens of squatter families, including only about four Carib families.



With Leo Donovan, a man Catholic priest of Arima, followed by Arima Mayor Elvin Edwards during the 1998 Santa Rosa Festival procession through the streets of Arima. The Carib's procession is led first and foremost by the church.

FORMAL INCORPORATION: A BUSINESS WITHOUT PROFITS

It is in the quest for land that the SRCC entered a stage of organizational formalization, with a president, elected officers, articles of association, a mission statement, and formal registration as a limited liability company in 1976. Bharath claims that attorneys for the Church advised them that incorporation was necessary in order to receive Church lands, upon which the present community center is built. The lands have yet to be transferred and, Bharath later learned, formal incorporation was not necessary. Indeed, it resulted in burdensome obligations to file tax returns when the SRCC was making no profits, also submitting the group to constant state oversight. The state also argued that to receive potentially profitable property, the SRCC had to be incorporated. They were registered with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture; the fees being paid for by a party Bharath would not name. As the former SRCC Public Relations Officer, Elma Reyes, once complained in a local documentary: 'This must be the only ethnic group in the world that is organized as a limited liability company!' The SRCC's status as such has since ended, while it maintains the same organizational form.

Perhaps it is a paradox that with this new organizational and corporate form, the SRCC can also be said to have entered a period of demise, unleashing internal jockeying for prominence and personality conflicts, external pressures and intervention, while the familial household traditions and the traditional leadership of the Queen of the Caribs have become increasingly marginalized and subservient to the interests of brokers and entrepreneurs both internal and external to the SRCC.

THE CARIB AGENDA

While it may be said that there is no articulated Carib voice heard in the Trinidadian polity, the SRCC does have certain specific aims and goals for itself. However, the SRCC has never adopted the idea or term "self-determination." There are eight objectives the SRCC has set out as its agenda: 1) obtaining communal lands within Arima for the construction of a Model Carib Village/ First Nations Botanical Park, serving as an educational and cultural tourism facility; 2) seeking financial and institutional support from the state and the private sector; 3) the creation of a research and documentation center within the Carib Community Center; 4) the proclamation of a National Day (not a public holiday) to honor and promote Trinidad's Amerindian heritage; 5) funding for the Cassava Project, with the intent of mechanizing and mass producing cassava bread and farine for sale in the local market; 6) the maintenance and preservation of "retained traditions" such as those listed thus far; 7) the "retrieval" of "the ancient ways" via historical research and through a process of borrowing called "cultural interchange" with more established Amerindian communities elsewhere in the Caribbean and on the South American mainland (Traditions targeted for retrieval include the Carib language, religious practices, handicraft techniques and adapted forms of traditional wear) and 8) support for funding and organizing exchange visits, on a protracted basis, with neighboring Amerindian communities, especially those of Dominica and Guyana.

The purpose of acquiring and developing traditions and recognition from other Indigenous groups abroad is what motivated the SRCC to develop international ties. The SRCC does not conduct any political lobbying on its behalf on the international plane.



Justa Werges, Queen of the Caribs, elected in 1988. Queen Werges is Trinidad's leading expert in Amerindian weaving and possesses considerable knowledge of Amerindian food preparation, herbal remedies, household construction and their history and tradition of the Santa Rosa Festival. Queen Werges likes to emphasize, "I work for Church and State."



A press conference held by Carib President Bharath (right) in September 1998, to protest the Ministry of Culture's delay of payment for the expenses incurred by the Caribs in preparing the Santa Rose Festival.

CULTURAL FUNDING, STATE CEREMONIALITY, AND FESTIVAL INDIANS

The Trinidadian state in the post-1962 Independence period cannot be easily characterized as one that discriminates against, persecutes, or suppresses people of Amerindian descent. Instead, there seems to be strong nationalistic pride at the societal level (i.e., casting Amerindians as "forebears of the Nation," "the First Trinidadians"), although one may still encounter acute skepticism among individuals (i.e. "They're not real Caribs, they're not pure, just a joke, looking to see what they could get.")

The Trinidadian situation is a complex one. Trinidad and Tobago is not a settler society like Canada or Australia. In the Trinidadian case, the former colonized are the ones who have achieved state power and independence, not the settler or colonizer — although, the new nation has inherited a sizeable baggage of colonial cultural assumptions and prejudices. The society has historically experienced intense patterns of "creolization" and assimilation on a number of fronts, producing a local amalgam of European, Asian, African, and Amerindian cultural influences. The majority is either of East Indian or African descent (each comprising about 42 percent of the total population). Reconciliation in Trinidad and Tobago is thus a society-wide imperative more than a straightforward case of the state vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples.



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The Carib section of the procession for the Santa Rosa Festival arriving at the Church of Santa Rosa de Arima on August 23, 1998. The flag bearer is the King of the Day (Zachary Medina) accompanied by the Queen of the Day (Sophia Diana Madonis).

Nevertheless, there has been significant state support for the SRCC. On May 19, 1990, the government officially recognized the SRCC as the "sole legitimate representative of Trinidad's retained community of Amerindians," a move that came about thanks to the work of Archaeologist Peter Harris and then Minister of Culture, Jennifer Johnson. That year ushered in an annual subvention of \$30,000 TT (roughly \$5000 US) for the Caribs' maintenance of the Santa Rosa Festival. In 1992, as Trinidad played host to the Caribbean Festival of the Arts (CARIFESTA), Arima was allocated \$250,000 TT as the center for Amerindian delegations from across the Caribbean, what has since been referred to as "The First Gathering" of Caribbean Amerindians in Trinidad. In August of 1993, the state in cooperation with the SRCC hosted "The Second Gathering" in Arima and in that same month the government's Director of Culture, Lester Efebo Wilkinson, formally applauded the SRCC for its "support of Indigenous causes worldwide." On August 31, 1993, the SRCC received from the President of the Republic, Noor Hassanali, the National Award of the Chaconia Medal (Silver) for Culture and Community Service. In 1995 the state again aided the SRCC in hosting Caribbean Amerindian delegations for another CARIFESTA. At the local government level, the Arima Borough Council had been providing the SRCC with \$500 TT annually for the Santa Rosa Festival. When SRCC President Bharath joined the General Council of the People's National Movement (a long time ruling party that led the country to independence), he entered local politics as a PNM candidate in 1993 and won a seat on the Borough Council, winning another election in 1996. Thanks to his presence as Councilor responsible for Culture, the Arima subvention increased to today's annual figure of \$5,000 TT. The Trinidad Regiment also offered the SRCC assistance with structural work, engineering and manpower in clearing land and constructing a village on land to be granted by a prominent Arima businesswoman and former Mayor of Arima. (That land grant has yet to take effect after several years of discussion.) One leading member of the SRCC also claimed to have accompanied Ricardo Bharath in signing up for the grant of a six-acre plot of state land, though I could not confirm this independently. The state, by Bharath's own admission, offered land that he found to be too distant from Arima and of poor quality, thus rejecting the offer. The state also offered Bharath ownership of a vacated office building in central Arima, which he also rejected claiming it required too many renovations. Unfortunately, the Queen (at that time Justa Werges), became a rival to Bharath within the SRCC and had set her heart on being housed in that structure — she now lives in central Trinidad, a good distance away from Arima.

THE PITFALLS OF INDIGENEITY IN TRINIDAD

One of the continuing obstacles facing the SRCC in its quest for more recognition is that of defining the term "Indigenous." The psyche of many, if not most Trinidadians, is highly racialized, demanding racial "purity" of anyone claiming a particular identity. Claims to a Carib cultural heritage are likewise faced with demands and expectations of complete continuity. This creates a problem of "credibility," which in turn causes a problem for the "legitimacy" of the SRCC under sustained scrutiny from the public at large. SRCC members are expected to know everything about pre-Columbian religious beliefs, speak the Cariban language, and have high-cheek bones, fine noses, straight hair and light skin. At the same time, continuing stereotypes of Caribs as cannibalistic savages imprint their identity with some stigma. Ascribing Caribs with a primitive and backward lifestyle, in a nation that idolizes North American modernity, also works to keep youths out of the SRCC, which poses distinct and immediate problems where its reproduction as an organization is concerned.

CARIBS, THE STATE AND FOREIGN POLICY

The degree to which the state celebrates and ceremonializes the Caribs, rather than taking them as a serious entity, is demonstrated by the fact that Trinidad's Indigenous people do not figure in official foreign policy stances. For example, the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was recently celebrated in Trinidad and featured in the media, yet no mention was made of Trinidad's Indigenous minority, nor their rights as such. Some state policies even impede the Caribs from renewing contacts and exchange with the Warrao Indians of Venezuela (14 kilometers away) who were accustomed to traveling freely to Trinidad and conducting trade as well as an important ritual on Naparima Hill in San Fernando. Immigration authorities have prevented this free movement since the middle of this century.

Under the auspices of the United Nations, a Government-SRCC committee was formed with the UN's International Year (1993) and

International Decade (1993-94) for the World's Indigenous People. According to SRCC leaders, this cooperative structure produced no results and had no apparent function, and has been discontinued.

If the state does not seem to take the SRCC seriously, in political terms much the same could be said of the local United Nations officers. The UN role and presence, as scarce as it has been, was mostly recognition — and cultural events-oriented. The UN's annual International Day for the World's Indigenous People, August 9th, is never commemorated in Trinidad. The implication is that the SRCC is seen as a symbolic representative of Indigenous peoples not as actually Indigenous itself.

Only the World Intellectual Property Organization has recently taken a serious interest, conferring with Cristo Adonis, the shaman of the SRCC, on his medicinal/ herbal knowledge in the context of establishing a legal framework to protect Indigenous knowledge.

GLOBALIZING CARIBS: INTER-AMERICAN RECOGNITION AND SOLIDARITY

The SRCC's struggle to attain greater recognition and legitimacy within Trinidad has been greatly facilitated by the impressive array of relationships and connections it has developed with Indigenous groups in the Caribbean and further afield. In 1992 the SRCC became the newest member of the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous People (COIP) and subsequently joined the World Council of Indigenous People. Unfortunately COIP has become segmented and is now largely moribund (see Forte 1998). Twenty-seven Dominica Caribs and at least three of its former chiefs have visited the SRCC on various occasions between 1992 and 1997, with some being repeat visitors. The visits involved teams engaging in cultural exchange with the SRCC. As I discovered in Dominica, very strong personal and emotional bonds developed between the two groups. In both Dominica and Trinidad many of my informants suggested they would ideally like



Rita Julia Calderon, known affectionately by some as "Tante Jule" was born in May 1913. Her speciality is the traditional processing of cassava into bread and farine. Here she sifts flour in a "marine", woven from the local timite plant.

the two groups to merge into one, settling in each other's territories, traveling freely and inter-marrying. The SRCC was also host for several weeks to Guyanese Amerindians teaching traditional weaving. Over all, the SRCC has received representatives from seven of Guyana's eight tribes and President Bharath has himself traveled to the Pomeroon River communities of Guyana. One SRCC member also traveled to Dominica and St. Vincent. In the last two years the SRCC has developed contacts and ties with Taino organizations in Puerto Rico and the US.

The SRCC has further internationalized its Indigenous connections. In November of 1991, President Bharath and Youth Representative Susan Campo participated in a Hemispheric gathering of Indigenous Peoples in Ottawa, Canada, hosted by the Assembly of First Nations of Canada. In 1992 Susan Campo was awarded a scholarship to study at the Saskatchewan Federated Indian College in Regina, Canada, along with several other Caribbean Amerindian students. She also traveled to meet the Seminole Indians of Florida. The SRCC has also hosted an Australian Aborigine for a gathering held in Arima in 1997. Most SRCC members recall these visits and exchanges as some of their brightest, happiest and most inspiring moments and the various visitors have left a strong imprint. Media attention would be focused at those times, and though it may have been seen as a colorful spectacle by segments of the national audience, the numerous visitors helped to focus attention on the SRCC and bestow a certain legitimacy on it as an Indigenous group.

PUBLIC RESURGENCE, PRIVATE DEMISE: THE NEED FOR INTERNAL RECONCILIATION

One of the effects of the SRCC's constant search for recognition — via the production of cultural events that attract attention — is that it has developed a pronounced external orientation to the detriment of building an internal community life. The community center, in fact, is usually empty or closed, except for two weeks each year when the members gather to work for the festival or for occasions such as a news conference or a special visitor. Funding by the state, specifically for the Santa Rosa Festival, has not aided the SRCC in achieving any measure of economic self-reliance. All funds are to be spent for the festival and none is allowed to remain in the SRCC itself. Another troubling development is that some of the members allege that funding is not shared equally. The need for internal reconciliation has become the most pressing problem the SRCC now faces, especially as it has undergone a drop in membership over the years. It is unable to conduct meetings regularly and some leading members have simply branched off.

INTERNAL SELF-DETERMINATION

There is perhaps, a view of self-determination that remains internal to the SRCC. Several leading members have explained that they want responsibilities to be shared, elections for president, and open accountability where funds are concerned. The SRCC currently has no treasurer and elections have not occurred for what some say is nearly 20 years. It is now common knowledge, locally, that the Queen and the shaman are disaffected members and that in itself is the problem, that it is common knowledge and this has rendered the group open to exploitation by external interests. Indeed, in a year with local government elections it is known that partisans of the ruling party have sought to pry the SRCC away from its traditional allegiance to the now opposition PNM. Many SRCC members feel they should not be beholden to the interests of any political party, nor so closely tied to the Catholic Church (via the festival) as this has driven away non-Catholic Caribs and those opposed to the PNM. In addition, there is growing disenchantment within the SRCC over the fact that it does not provide a source of material sustenance to a community whose members are uniformly very poor, some desperately so. Some have suggested that the SRCC serve as a cooperative society, with its own communal savings, and collective business activities. The dissenters' vision is of a democratic, collectivist, revenue earning and open

community in business more for itself than its external allies are. As the shaman told a local journalist in a prominent magazine: "Religion and Politics have destroyed the Carib Community."

There is also an internal problem of self-definition within the SRCC that renders future recognition-oriented politics more complex. Basically, the dividing line has emerged between the colonial Carib (urban, Catholic, respectful of authority) and the post-colonial Indigene militating for independent shamanic ceremonies, traditional wear, egalitarianism, and free from obligations to powerful institutions. Indeed, the strategy of choosing an appropriate name has now come into the open, some preferring "Carib," others "Amerindian," and some just "First Nations" or a combination of these. There is also the dividing line between modern leadership, in the form of a presidency, traditional leadership in the form of the Queen, and neo-traditional leadership (the new shaman), with the three now set against each other (and this too is known publicly). The state funds the President directly thus, perhaps unwittingly, undermining traditional leadership structures. The Church, instead, has often sided with the Queen as her office is nearly ecclesiastical since she serves as representative of St. Rose, and only attains legitimate office within the SRCC once benedicted by the parish priest. After that, the Vatican itself is informed that a new Queen has been selected. Another dividing line is between the choice of continuing to tie Carib identity to Arima versus opening the group up to Amerindian descendants across Trinidad. One also finds local versus global and urban versus rural tensions within the SRCC — which is aggravated by the fact that Trinidadian ethnic tensions between East Indians and Africans have entered the SRCC given the members' own intermarriage with these groups.

CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

While a quarter century of struggles for recognition and resources has marked the reorganization and resurgence of a sense of Arima's Carib-ness, the same process may have led to the fissure of the SRCC and its possible

demise as an organization in the near future. Seemingly consensual incorporation into the state has resulted in internal dissension. Too many local politicians have vested interests in the SRCC. While this has helped the group achieve recognition, it has also drawn the "wrong" sort of attention to it. Having been typecast by nationalist intellectuals as symbols of the ancient ancestry of the modern state, adopted by others as symbolic mascots of Arima, or working as a ceremonial arm of the Church, leaves little room for SRCC self-determination. In the process some of its members have become exasperated. Commercialization, local ecotourist ventures, and even local New Age adherents have all shaped the path of the SRCC or the organizations that have spun off from it. How Indigenous concepts of self-determination and reconciliation can or will evolve is still largely an open question.

However, the SRCC has had its proven successes. It has succeeded, to some extent, in highlighting the presence, the history, the value, and the acceptance of an Indigenous organization in Trinidad — made possible by the media, local and foreign researchers, local schools and libraries. Moments of crisis may well prove to be moments of opportunity to reshape and perpetuate the self-pride of Trinidad's Amerindian descendants.

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