Under the Caribbean Sun: Voices and Visions of Trinidad & Tobago

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Introduction

Beneath the radiant light of the Caribbean sun, two islands—Trinidad and Tobago—sparkle with cultural riches, rare diversity, and an irrepressible spirit. This southernmost Caribbean nation pulses not just with the rhythms of calypso and soca, but with the everyday energy of its people: a dynamic blend of African, Indian, European, Indigenous, Chinese, and Middle Eastern heritage. Trinidad & Tobago is, in every sense, a living mosaic—where history's tides and human migrations have mingled to shape a society unlike any other in the region.

This book, *Under the Caribbean Sun: Voices and Visions of Trinidad & Tobago*, invites you on a vibrant journey through festivals, food, art, and daily life—exploring not only the events and expressions that make these islands famous, but the deeper stories behind them. Within these pages, you'll find firsthand voices and vivid scenes from Carnival's kaleidoscopic masquerade bands, markets fragrant with fresh herbs and pepper sauce, the tranquil hush of mosques and temples at sunset, and the ever-present laughter in backyards during a Sunday lime. We unravel the threads of language, ritual, and worldview that tie Trinbagonians together across geographic, ethnic, and spiritual lines.

At the heart of this journey are the islands' rich traditions—born from centuries of encounter, struggle, and celebration. We begin with the wisdom and customs of the original First Peoples, then witness waves of colonization and migration: the forced toil of enslaved Africans, the resilience and creativity of Indian and Chinese indentured communities, and the cultural footprints of European empires. From these crossings sprang a kaleidoscope of identities and an unparalleled festival calendar, where each faith and family finds its own way to sing, dance, pray, and feast.

Yet, this book is more than a portrait of the past. Through stories, interviews, and contemporary perspectives, we explore how Trinidad and Tobago continues to remake itself: from the artistry of Carnival kings and steelpan innovators to acclaimed writers, young designers, and everyday heroes in the towns and villages. Alongside its joys and achievements, we will also look honestly at the islands' challenges—how economic shifts, generational change, and the delicate balance of multicultural unity shape hopes for the future.

Whether you are an armchair traveler curious about the southern Caribbean, a food lover hungry for new flavors, a music enthusiast drawn to the beat of pan and tassa, or a would-be visitor planning your trip, this book is designed as your guide. Our aim is to carry you beyond the postcard-perfect beaches, into kitchens, homes, fêtes, and forests, offering insights and anecdotes that reveal what it truly means to live "under

the Caribbean sun.”

In celebrating Trinidad & Tobago’s voices and visions, we hope to spark not just appreciation, but connection—a sense that the world grows richer and brighter as we come to know its many cultures. Let your journey begin.

CHAPTER ONE: The Islands’ First Voices: Indigenous Peoples and Early Traditions

Long before colonial flags were planted and the echoes of distant lands arrived on these shores, Trinidad and Tobago hummed with the quiet industry and rich spiritual lives of its First Peoples. These were the original inhabitants, whose presence shaped the very foundations of the islands, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape, language, and early cultural practices that persist even today. Their story is one of ancient migration, sophisticated adaptation, and enduring resilience.

Archaeological evidence paints a vivid picture of early life, stretching back some 7,000 years in Trinidad. One of the most significant sites, Banwari Trace in southwestern Trinidad, holds the distinction of being the oldest discovered human settlement in the eastern Caribbean. Here, the remains of "Banwari Man," the oldest human skeleton found in the region, whisper tales of a time when pre-ceramic peoples, known as Archaic or Ortoiroid, journeyed from the Orinoco River Delta in modern-day Venezuela. They were hunter-gatherers, skillfully navigating the rich natural resources of the islands, fishing, hunting, and cultivating a range of roots, palm starch, and seeds.

Around 250 BCE, a new wave of migrants arrived, bringing with them the art of pottery. These were the Saladoid people, also believed to have journeyed from the Orinoco River region. Their distinctive ceramics and cultural artifacts have been unearthed at numerous sites across Trinidad and Tobago, indicating a widespread presence. Following them, around 250 CE, came the Barrancoid people, who settled in southern Trinidad, and then the Arauquinoid group, whose cultural influences further diversified the islands. By 1300 CE, another group, representing the Mayoid cultural tradition, had settled, contributing to the native tribes present at the time of European arrival.

At the cusp of European contact in 1498, Trinidad was home to a vibrant tapestry of Indigenous groups. These included Arawakan-speaking peoples like the Nepoya and Suppoya, and Cariban-speaking groups such as the Yao. The Nepoya, for instance, were known for their agricultural prowess, cultivating crops like cassava, maize, and sweet potatoes, and living in organized, agrarian communities. Tobago, with its distinct history, was primarily inhabited by the Kalina, also known as Island Caribs, and the Galibi.

The First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago were not isolated communities; they were active participants in a vast inter-island and island-to-mainland trade network. Imagine canoes, crafted with expertise, plying the waters between Trinidad and the South

American continent, laden with goods to barter. The Warao people of Venezuela, for instance, were regular visitors to Trinidad, engaging in trade that continued for centuries, right up until the 1930s, exchanging items like parrots, hunting dogs, and hammocks. This intricate system of exchange laid the groundwork for future trade routes and demonstrated a profound understanding of the region's geography and resources.

Their intimate relationship with the land went beyond mere sustenance; it was deeply spiritual. The First Peoples practiced environmental sustainability long before the term became widely used, understanding the delicate balance of nature. This deep respect for "Mother Earth" was woven into their daily lives and agricultural practices. Even today, the legacy of their agricultural knowledge can be seen in the continued cultivation of crops like cassava, corn, and cocoa.

The culinary landscape of Trinidad and Tobago still bears the flavors of its Indigenous heritage. Many traditional dishes and ingredients owe their existence to the First Peoples. Think of cassava bread, not the loaf many imagine, but a thin, flat wafer made from this versatile root. Or the hearty 'pepperpot' stew, a rich concoction where cassava juice is boiled and flavored with peppers and wild meats. The pungent chadon beni (culantro), a staple in Trinidadian seasoning, and roucou (annatto), used for its vibrant color, are also direct inheritances from Indigenous culinary traditions. Even the beloved practice of barbecuing wild game, a staple at many a lime, has its roots in these ancient customs.

Beyond food, the linguistic imprint of the First Peoples is evident in countless place names across the islands. Journey through Trinidad and you'll encounter towns and features whose names echo their original inhabitants: Arima, Paria, Arouca, Tacarigua, Chaguanas, Mayaro, and Guayaguayare, to name just a few. Even the Caroni swamp and Aripo mountains carry names that speak of a time long past. In Tobago, places like Chaguaramas, Macqueripe, and Chacachacare also derive their names from Indigenous words, reminding us of the deep connection between the people and their environment.

Traditional crafts, too, carry the echoes of the First Peoples. The design of the canoe, an essential mode of transport in the region, the ingenious simplicity of the bow and arrow, and the comfortable ajoupa (a simple, open-sided dwelling) are all testaments to their ingenuity and resourcefulness. Even the hammock, a symbol of relaxation throughout the Caribbean, is an Amerindian invention, a practical piece of furniture for sleeping or resting in the tropical climate.

The spiritual traditions of the First Peoples were closely tied to the natural world, and their ceremonies often involved music and dance. While much has been lost due to centuries of colonial impact, remnants of their vibrant cultural expressions can still be found. The Santa Rosa Festival in Arima, for instance, with its deeply rooted history in

the Indigenous community, serves as a powerful reminder of their enduring spiritual legacy.

The arrival of Europeans in 1498 marked a devastating turning point for the Indigenous population. The Spanish, in their pursuit of gold and conversion, enacted systems like the encomienda, which subjected the First Peoples to forced labor and harsh conditions. Diseases brought by the Europeans, against which the Indigenous populations had no immunity, also decimated their numbers. Historical estimates suggest that the Amerindian population of Trinidad, which was as high as 200,000 in 1498, significantly declined to around 40,000 by 1595. Many were captured and sent to work as slaves in other Spanish territories.

Despite the severe decline in their population, the descendants of the First Peoples never entirely vanished. Today, Trinidadians with full or partial Amerindian heritage can be found in areas like Toco/Cumana, Arima, and Siparia. Surnames such as Calderon, Hernandez, Campo, and Lopez are often indicative of this ancestral lineage. The Santa Rosa First People Community in Arima is officially recognized by the Trinidad and Tobago government as the legitimate representative of the islands' remaining Indigenous people.

Ricardo Bharath Hernandez, the chief of the Santa Rosa First People Community, embodies the ongoing efforts to preserve and celebrate this heritage. He and the community actively work to revive ancestral traditions, share their history, and promote greater understanding and appreciation of the First Peoples’ contributions to Trinidad and Tobago’s diverse culture. Their annual Heritage Week, culminating around October 14th, features sacred traditions such as the Smoke Ceremony and the Water Ritual, alongside Indigenous street parades and cultural events. These gatherings are vital for maintaining their identity and sharing their story with a wider audience.

The story of the First Peoples is a poignant reminder of the ebb and flow of human history. Their deep connection to the land, their ingenuity, and their sophisticated societal structures laid the very groundwork for the islands that exist today. While European colonization brought immense suffering and loss, the spirit of the First Peoples endures, woven into the very fabric of Trinidad and Tobago's vibrant and multifaceted identity. Their legacy is not just one of the past, but a living, breathing part of the nation's present and future.

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