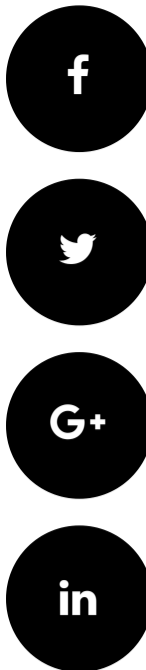


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Finally, some land

by Mon Aug 08 2016

Shereen Ali

They've waited for more than 30 years, so far, for a bit of communal land to call their own. And if you include the time since their land was first stolen from them, they've been waiting for a great deal longer—over two centuries, in fact.

Today's descendants of T&T's indigenous peoples—among the very first "Trinidadians," or "Kairians"—are a mixed group. Sharing bloodlines from virtually every major race that has lived in Trinidad for the past couple centuries, the amazing thing is that they still exist at all.

But indeed they do live on, some surviving what was the worst genocide in T&T's entire history—a terrible and bloody time when native Amerindians were enslaved, beaten, raped, killed and infected with foreign diseases in a chilling orgy of brutality spearheaded by adventurist Europeans who swept through the Caribbean islands on a path of indigenous destruction and greedy land grabs.

The very first T&T citizens had included Amerindians of the Kalina, Warao, Kalipuna, Nepuyo, Taino, Aruaca and Carib peoples. Some lived here as long as 7,000 years ago. For many centuries, these peoples evolved their own civilisation. Trinidad's Amerindians were part of a large inter-island and island-to-mainland trade network.

The Warao of Venezuela, who still exist, used to visit Trinidad regularly for centuries, right up until 1930, to trade parrots, hunting dogs and hammocks.

Amerindian survivors today in Trinidad live on in the ghosts of trace features, in many of our place names, and in the scattered memories and the fractured and blended cultures of their diverse descendants, of whom there are said to be possibly 600 in the Arima area. There are more, further afield, who don't even know of their Amerindian heritage, because lineages—and memories, and histories—have become so mixed up through interbreeding, cultural repression, and amnesia.

Some of those Amerindian survivors, however, are now in the process of reclaiming their own history, seeking to remember and celebrate their heritage and their right to be here, amidst curious resistance from some fellow citizens who don't seem to be aware or to understand that the Amerindians not only have valid claims here, but that they have the first claims here, above and before any other groups who arrived later.

Chief welcomes Arima land lease

Ricardo Bharath Hernandez is chief of the Santa Rosa First People's Community, a group formed in 1970 of Amerindian—largely Carib—descendants. Hernandez was delighted to hear of Prime Minister Rowley's recent statements on Emancipation Day (Monday, August 1) that T&T's First Peoples would soon get land to use at Arima for a heritage village. But he reminded the T&T Guardian last week that this has been a process going on for some years now.

Land grants or leases for Amerindian descendants were already approved by Cabinet, but held up by interminable, mysterious delays at government level. T&T Guardian questions to the Ministry of Culture and Community Development about these issues (indigenous peoples now fall under this ministry) were welcomed, but not answered up to yesterday. However, officials said they would respond soon.

In an interview I did two years ago with Hernandez (October 16, 2014, T&T Guardian), the Chief reminded me that T&T Amerindians had actually been given 1,320 acres of land, which the British subsequently stole from them. He had said:

"The Amerindian people were brought to Arima in the establishment of the Mission in 1759, which was neglected for 30 years, then enlarged in 1785...The Amerindians in Arima numbered more than 600 at that time; and they were granted, collectively, 1,000 acres of land.

"The land was held in trust by the Catholic Church for the Amerindians—there were no individual deeds...Then another governor came and added 320 acres of land to that original 1,000. So in all, the Amerindians of Arima owned 1,320 acres.

"And under the British, all the lands were taken and sold, because they asked the Amerindians for a deed. In Christ's name, where would they have gotten a deed? Who would have given them a deed?...And that is how the Amerindians lost their land. All 1,320 acres were taken away from them. It was essentially theft.

"First Peoples were the foundation of this country. It is important we know that. Civilisation did not start with Columbus."

First Peoples' land issues, since 1990

Cabinet, on May 8, 1990, formally recognised the Santa Rosa Carib Community as the only legitimate representative of T&T's indigenous people. And the community has been asking for land for decades now. In an August 4 interview with Chief Hernandez in Arima, Hernandez summarised what's been happening.

"The last PNM administration (before the PP), had taken a Cabinet decision to grant us five acres of land. Soon after that decision, they went out of office, and the PP government came in. The PP government rescinded that five acres and made it a 30-year lease (not a grant) of 25 acres, by Cabinet decision, because we told them it was not enough for what we wanted to do. It was practically an insult to give us five acres—an indigenous community that owned 1,320 acres of land as a Mission community."

"Subsequent to that (second) Cabinet decision, we were offered by the Commissioner of State Lands the official offer of a lease, with conditions, by letter dated September 4, 2015, which the community accepted," said Hernandez.

The letter says Cabinet agreed that an "Institutional Lease be granted to the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community" at a site at 1 1/4 Mile Mark, Blanchisseuse Road, Arima, for a period of 30 years, with an option to renew for another 30 years.

Hernandez wants very much to create a sustainable Amerindian model village and living museum on the 25-acre site earmarked for the community, an enterprise that would help Amerindian descendants to not only regain a sense of their spiritual roots, traditional crafts and way of life, but that would also help the largely impoverished community earn a living too, through eco-tourism, heritage tourism, a guest house, and agricultural and forest-tour activities.

Such a heritage site would also have national value as part of our T&T Amerindian heritage, and act as a headquarters from where further learning, exchanges and linkages with the region's Amerindian indigenous peoples could develop.

It's a dream long held by the Santa Rosa First peoples Community, who have had a preliminary Master Plan for the village written up since 2014, which is still being developed.

"We would be much happier with a land grant; but we understand that where the land is situated, a grant cannot be given," said Hernandez last week.

"But there are Government lands adjoining this present 25-acre site; and maybe we could consider that in the future," added Hernandez. "We are looking to go into re-establishing cocoa, and other agricultural activities, so more land would be needed."

Hernandez noted that there exists some \$500,000 now available in the PSIP for Amerindian indigenous people's development here, and he is hoping that will be released soon as seed funding for the heritage village.

Hernandez says there are also several corporate bodies interested in investing in the idea, including Winston Boodoo, chair of the Power and Energy Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) for T&T.

In a brief telephone interview yesterday, Boodoo confirmed this: "We offer engineering assistance to NGOs and national development projects. We are already involved with the cocoa industry. At the Amerindian Village, we propose to incorporate new technology with their way of life—we will provide a mix of solar power and wind power to supply some of their lighting and electricity needs at the heritage village, at no cost to them. We are also looking to set up a wi-fi network for them. So, a mix of the old and the new."

It's a wonderful gift that would align with indigenous people's existing strong beliefs in protecting the land and sustainable lifestyles.

Chief Hernandez mentioned four issues he hopes will be addressed soon: land rights; release of PSIP funds so the community can start projects; appropriate treatment of Amerindian remains at the Red House; and the declaration of a one-off public holiday in honour of First Peoples, past and present. He affirmed:

"We need to have an equal place in this society."

OUR HISTORY ROOTED IN AMERINDIAN GENOCIDE

According to historian Angelo Bissessarsingh, the genocide in Trinidad really stepped up after 1592, when the Spanish set up their first town in Trinidad—St Joseph—right on lands belonging to the cacique Goagonare. The Spanish encomienda system systematically brutalised the Indians by stealing their freedom, forcing them to labour on Spanish plantations located in Aricagua (San Juan), Tacarigua and Arauca (Arouca), and forcibly converting them to Christianity, stripping them of their culture.

Many died along the way. First Peoples in Trinidad were captured to work the cocoa fields in the Northern Range and the tobacco gardens in the encomiendas in the Siparia-Erin area. Most of the clearing of land in the present East-West corridor and the uplands of Naparima and Oropouche was done by Amerindian labour, state the Santa Rosa First People's Community.

The East-West corridor itself was once an ancient Amerindian pathway connecting the original Nepuyo villages of Aricagua, Tacarigua, Arauca, and Caura. The Amerindians gave T&T its first major rebellion in the name of freedom: the Arena uprising of 1699, led by Cacique Bustamante.

In 1783 Trinidad's Amerindians were displaced from their lands to make way for the influx of French planters and their enslaved African labourers, in the quest for more white settlers and for a sugar economy. In 1786, states Bissessarsingh, remaining Amerindians at Aricagua and Tacarigua were moved to Arima, with a smaller number being moved to present-day Princes Town.

Researcher Maximilian Forte states that most of the Amerindians at the Arima Mission were converted to Catholicism, and were given Spanish names, but most originally spoke Nepuyo. Bissessarsingh referred to their utter "despair and defeat" in an article—Strong Case for Reparation—in which he traces in detail what happened to the First Peoples in Trinidad, and advances a case for property rights for the Arima descendants.

It's estimated there were 40,000 Amerindians living in T&T at the time of Spanish settlement in 1592; by 1634 there were 4,000; and today, there are probably none of pure Amerindian blood, but a few hundred of mixed blood.

Interestingly, 2013 genetic tests in T&T (done as part of the National Geographic Genographic Project on the Carib community in Trinidad) revealed that members of the Arima community of Amerindians have a complex ancestry, with strong ancestral links to both Native American Indians and to Africans.

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