

Does Trinidad Recognize Its Indigenous People?

The following is a recent Editorial from the CAC Review:

What Recognition?

Along with the leadership of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, I have been one of those who has frequently written that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has formally recognized the same Carib Community, a formally registered organization based in the Borough of Arima. The reasons for stating this can be explained as follows:

(i) According to News Release No. 360, issued by the Information Division, Office of the Prime Minister, on May 8, 1990, "Cabinet has decided that the Santa Rosa Carib Community be recognized as representative of the indigenous Amerindians of Trinidad and Tobago, and that an annual subvention of \$30,000 be granted to them from 1990. Cabinet also agreed that an Amerindian Project Committee be appointed to advise government on the development of the Community... as the oldest sector of this country's multi-cultural society, the Amerindians have, for some time, been recognized as having unique needs for their cultural and economic viability. Such needs come into higher relief and sharper focus as the country prepares to celebrate, Columbus' Quincentennial in October 1992."

The juxtaposition of ideas here is significant, because the news release highlights the context in which the decision became important: a commemorative event, held in conjunction with the Caribbean Festival of the Arts (CARIFESTA) hosted by Trinidad in 1992, where the Government sought to showcase indigenous peoples, including its own.

In the presentation of the National Trust Bill, in the parliament on Friday, March 15, 1991, the then Minister of Food Production and Marine Exploitation, Dr. Brinsley Samaroo stated the following:

"The third project that is being undertaken by this Government has to do with the way in which we have duly recognized the presence of, and importance of, the descendants of the indigenous peoples of our lands. That is another area that the Member for Naparima mentioned and I do hope he now believes that he is not being disregarded in the contributions that he has been making as we are addressing some of the issues that he raised. No one can deny that those who laid the first foundations of our civilization were the Caribs and the Awaraks [sic] the two largest nations of our early history and the smaller tribes such as the Tianos [sic] and Lucayos [sic] who also inhabited this country. These were our ancestors who taught us to use our hammocks and to boucanour [sic] fish and meat. These were the people who showed us how to live in harmony with nature and gave us our first lessons in the protection of the environment. From them we obtained such names as 'Mucarapo' from the Amerindian word Cumo Mucurabo, a place of great silk cotton trees; 'Arima', the place of water [sic]; 'Naparima', no water [sic]; and 'Tacarigua' being the name of an Amerindian chief from the Caura Valley. For many years, their local descendants, these descendants of early and first members of this country, were vainly clamouring for recognition from the past administration, as the representatives of the indigenous Amerindians of Trinidad and Tobago and for Government to help in preserving that part of the national heritage. It was this Government which gave such recognition by Cabinet decision of April, 1990. We agreed,

among other things, to recognize the Santa Rosa Carib community as the representative of the indigenous Amerindians of this nation; we agreed to an annual subvention of \$30,000 towards their upkeep and preservation of the national heritage; we agreed to make the contribution of the indigenous peoples, an essential part of our observation of the 500 years of our achievements which will coincide with the quincentennial of Columbus arrival here 500 years ago. The year of course for that is 1992. At the present time, the Government is talking to these persons whom we have recognized about giving them a piece of land as a permanent site for the establishment of a village to commemorate their ancestry" (see page 27 of the House of Representatives report for that date).

(ii) As a result of that decision in 1990, the Santa Rosa Carib Community has received an annual subvention from the Government of \$30,000 TT per annum, along with \$5,000 TT per annum from a local government body, the Arima Borough Council, still attached to the central government. (For confirmation of the first amount, see page 56 of the House Debates for 1992.)

(iii) Frequently, for many national events, the Government has highlighted the presence of the Santa Rosa Carib Community. This occurred on three occasions that CARIFESTA was hosted by Trinidad and Tobago, as well as several public speeches of commitment to provide the Caribs with land, and multiple visits by government ministers to a government-funded Carib Community Centre in Arima. (Where CARIFESTA is concerned, see an example of the festival-related "recognition" at: <http://www.carifesta.net/art7.php>.)

(iv) The Government also created a formally named "Day of Recognition, " presumably to be "observed" every October 14 (see the Hansard for July 18, 2000.)

Recognizing What?

In other words, yes, in multiple ways the Government has formally and effectively recognized ...what?

The fact of the matter is that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has no legal definition of the term "indigenous peoples," and frequently appropriates the term for referring to all people born in the country, in contradiction to established international conventions. Secondly, the Government has only recognized only one specific organization, and worse yet, it has recognized it in a manner that suggests it is the only possible representative of Trinidad's "Amerindians, " rendering any other claimants to an indigenous identity as fakes. Thirdly, while claiming to recognize the Caribs, the Government has not signed any international conventions or agreements that pertain specifically to the rights of indigenous peoples.

And Now Comes the UN...

The United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), in a report on the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean issued in June of 2006, found fault with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago specifically on the issue of its lack of legal recognition of the indigenous people of the nation. On page 534 in that report, CERD states:

"351. The Committee expresses its concern at the absence...of specific information on the indigenous population as well as other relatively small ethnic groups of the State party in the report, and particularly the absence of a specific categorization of the indigenous population

as a separate ethnic group in official statistics on the population. The Committee encourages the Government to include the indigenous population in any statistical data as a separate ethnic group, and actively to seek consultations with them as to how they prefer to be identified, as well as on policies and programmes affecting them."

In a supplement, on page 536, CERD reveals with specific reference to the Caribs:

"34. Members of the Committee asked why the Caribs had all but disappeared, exactly how many were left, why they were not treated as a separate racial group and whether measures were being taken to help them, particularly in the economic and educational fields, so as to compensate them for the injustices they had suffered."

In other words, CERD had been told by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago that the Caribs were virtually extinct, and as is typical of government statements on this matter, "the only remaining descendants are to be found in Arima." What is especially remarkable is that CERD has been making such observations, and asking such questions of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, regularly and as far back as 1980, as the supplements to the report reveal.

It is a fact that there is no population census in Trinidad that admits the category of either indigenous, Amerindian, Carib, or anything remotely related, as a choice for self-identification. This renders extraordinary the incredible statement recently made by the Minister for Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs, Joan Yuille Williams who proclaimed on Saturday, September 23, 2006, in the Carib Community Centre itself, that people of Amerindian and "mixed Amerindian" descent in Trinidad are "a very small minority," as I myself heard her say this. In the absence of a census that allows for such identification, there is nothing to substantiate her assertion.

So why make such an assertion?

As a politician in a race-based political party, the People's National Movement, Minister Williams knows how many votes have been won by her party over the decades by appealing to Afro-Trinidadians. Likewise, the other major political bloc in the country, formerly the United National Congress, seized considerable political power by appealing to Trinidadians of East Indian descent. These two major ethnic blocs have dominated national politics. Any third identification would radically upset the established way of calculating rewards and patronage, of dividing spoils in what is in effect a long standing Cold War that has rendered the country bipolar (perhaps in more than the political sense alone).

Secondly, the assertion is convenient when the main aim of the Government has not been to take the Caribs seriously. Instead, the Caribs are trotted out as mere showpieces for festivals and commemorative events, like a colourful little museum piece, but certainly nothing of any social or political import. The Santa Rosa Carib Community, in practice, is treated as a tokenistic, folkloric troupe--mild, smiling, doing its part to add a little more colour to the multicultural fabric waved by the nation to greet tourists.

Thirdly, the leadership of the Santa Rosa Carib Community has not vocally and directly challenged the government on these questions. This is in part due to strong political ties between the leadership and the PNM, the dependency on government funding, and the lack of any ambition to become involved in a national movement for the recuperation of indigenous

identity. Such sentiments, in my experience, have been heard most loudly from expatriate Trinidadians who wish to recoup their indigenous identity, and who understand that if not a majority, at least an extremely large minority of Trinidadians could claim indigenous ancestry. Many more are in fact claiming this ancestry.

So when asking the Government of Trinidad and Tobago if it recognizes the indigenous people of the country, and it answers, "the Santa Rosa Carib Community has been recognized," it is important to understand the evasiveness of the answer. The answer, in any legal and political sense, is that no, there is no such recognition.

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