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# The Historical Background to the Culture of Violence in Trinidad and Tobago

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## Abstract

This paper examines the historical background to the present-day culture of violence in Trinidad and Tobago, with reference to the period from pre-Columbian times to the mid-twentieth century. After noting the horrific violence associated with initial Spanish colonization and the decimation of the indigenes, the paper goes on to examine the nature of enslavement and its links to coercion and brutalization of the enslaved people. After the formal end of slavery, the paper considers the system of indentured immigration, which, though less violent than enslavement, was nevertheless a harsh system of forced labour. Aspects of the history of Trinidad in the period between the 1830s and the 1940s, as they helped to shape an often violent culture and society, are considered, especially those relating to domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. Finally, the social evolution of Tobago is examined, to show that by and large, that island had not developed a culture of violence comparable to that of Trinidad, at least up to the mid-twentieth century.

**Key words:** violence, slavery, indenture, Trinidad, Tobago

## **Introduction**

This article will analyse the historical evolution of a “culture of violence” in Trinidad and Tobago, from the first contact between Europeans and Amerindians to episodes in the mid-twentieth century. Clearly, developments after 1962 in the post-Independence period—which this article does not examine—constitute a fundamental part of the reasons for the country’s current situation with respect to crime and violence. But the foundations for it had, tragically, been extensively laid in the preceding centuries.

The recorded history of the Caribbean began in sustained violence against the indigenous peoples of the region, the first great genocide of modern history. The enslavement of Africans, which followed on the extermination of most of the indigenes, was a peculiarly violent system of coerced labour and social control. Post-slavery contract or indentured labour schemes, though less overtly violent than African slavery, still rested on coercion and the actual use or threat of force. By the end of the nineteenth century a culture of violence certainly had been established in the Caribbean colonies, and Trinidad and Tobago was no exception. While this culture was pervasive and in some respects “gender neutral”, there is no doubt that women of all ethnicities were prominent among its victims—as well as being, in some situations, its active agents.

## **Genocide and the indigenous peoples**

Almost from the moment of first contact between Spaniards and the indigenous Lokono (Arawaks) and Kalina (Caribs) settled in Trinidad, the latter were attacked and enslaved. Most were seized for slave labour in the Greater Antilles (depleted of their own Taino population within just a few years of Columbus’ first settlements) or in the pearl fishing grounds of Cubagua, near Margarita. In the early part of the sixteenth century, long before the Spaniards had established any permanent presence in Trinidad, the Amerindian population was being steadily depleted by frequent slave raids. (Boomert 1984, 141–55)

Bartolomé de Las Casas, the famous defender of the Indians in the New World, described a slaving raid to Trinidad carried out by one Juan Bono. He tricked the friendly Indians into entering a large house they had built for the Spaniards, then tied them all up and whenever any tried to escape “he was cut to pieces. Some of the Indians managed to escape, either wounded or unharmed, and they, with the villagers who had not entered the house, seized another house and with bows and arrows defended themselves against the Spaniards until the Christians set fire to the house, burning to death all the Indians inside it. Then, with their captives numbering 180 or 200, the Spaniards went down to their ships, hoisted sail and voyaged to San Juan [Puerto Rico], where half the number of Indians were sold as slaves, after which they voyaged to Hispaniola where the remainder of the captives were sold.” (Johnson 1997, 28–29)

Others went to the infamous pearl fisheries of Cubagua, where the slaves were forced to dive for pearls under conditions that guaranteed a short and miserable existence. It is Las Casas again who describes their work: “They put them under water some four or five ells deep, where they are forced without any liberty of respiration, to gather up the shells...sometimes they come up again with nets full of shells to take breath, but if they stay any while to rest themselves, immediately comes a hangman rowed in a little boat,

who as soon as he hath well beaten them, drags them again to their labour...they lie upon the ground in fetters, lest they should run away; and many times they are drowned in this labour, and are never seen again...oftentimes they are also devoured by certain sea monsters...or succumb to a death so much more painful, by reason that by the coarctation of the breast, while the lungs strive to do their office, the vital parts are so afflicted that they die vomiting the blood out of their mouths. Their hair also, which is by nature black, is hereby changed and made of the same colour with that of the sea wolves; their bodies are also so besprinkled with the froth of the sea, that they appear rather like monsters than men". (Johnson 1997, 26)

By 1592, when a permanent Spanish settlement was established at St Joseph, the local population had already been drastically reduced by aggressive slave raiding. This continued and perhaps intensified after 1592, with Indians enslaved and sold to settlers in Margarita, and their lands seized and given to Spaniards, provoking significant rebellions by 1593–95. Spanish slave raiding was the main reason for the flight of Indians from Trinidad to the mainland in the 1590s and early 1600s. With frequent slave raids; losses from disease; the disruption of traditional subsistence activities; and flight to the mainland, depopulation accelerated in the first part of the seventeenth century. Probably less than 4000 survived to the 1630s, as compared with some 40,000 a century before. (Boomert 1984, 155–62; Naipaul 1973, 25–69)

Insurrections against the Spaniards were frequent in the seventeenth century, followed by “pacifications”—executions and destruction of huts and gardens. Some Indians were herded into “encomiendas”, villages where they were effectively slaves of Spanish landowners. Others lived precariously in the forests. The last Indian rebellion in Trinidad was in 1699, when some under the charge of the Capuchin missionary order killed friars, the governor and a few other Spanish notables at Arena. The reprisals were predictably brutal; many who survived the final conflict at Punta Galera drowned themselves, but 61 were captured, tortured and executed, their bodies quartered and the pieces displayed on spikes on the St Joseph public road. This was the final “pacification”. The Indian population dwindled in the eighteenth century to about 2000, and by the next century a distinct Amerindian group no longer existed. (Naipaul 1973, 117–21). Trinidad’s modern history had been inaugurated with violence on a scale that amounted to genocide.

### **The violence of enslavement**

It is well known that the enslavement of Africans for labour in the New World was accompanied by massive violence and huge levels of mortality. The Middle Passage was a veritable “Way of Death”, and loss of life, from the initial capture of victims in Africa to the enormous mortality of the “seasoning” process during the first two years after arrival in the Americas, was so unthinkable great as to constitute a genuine “Holocaust”. The great principle of New World slavery was that the owner should have absolute power to coerce and punish his chattel.

In Trinidad and Tobago as everywhere else, corporal punishment (usually flogging) was a routine aspect of plantation discipline, and—short of actual murder—no effective

restrictions existed on the right of an owner or manager of slaves to punish at his discretion. Governor Picton's Slave Ordinance of 1800 put the limit at 39 lashes at any one time, but no serious attempts were made to enforce this and it was only in the last decade of slavery (1824–34) that half-hearted efforts were made to restrict corporal punishment. Moreover, quite apart from floggings administered as punishment for "offences", a heavy cartwhip was routinely carried by the slave drivers in the field, to be casually applied to the bodies of the workers (male and female) as a spur to labour. This was considered to be indispensable for exacting sufficient amounts of work from the field gangs, just as the right to punish by flogging was considered to be necessary for maintaining discipline and control over the slave population as a whole. And it was not only field slaves who were flogged; domestics (men and women, but especially women) were also flogged or otherwise assaulted, sometimes by the mistress of the house personally. Corporal punishment was a norm of the domestic routine during slavery as much as it was in the plantation fields and factories.

The centrality of corporal punishment to plantation discipline and to the slave system as a whole was illustrated by the hysterical reaction of the Trinidad slave owners to the announcement, in 1823, that the British Government had decided to embark on some modest reforms: the abolition of the use of the whip in the fields; a complete ban on the flogging of women; and restrictions on the flogging of men. Reports from indignation meetings held all over the island poured in to the governor (himself very doubtful about the proposed reforms). "To deprive the master of inflicting corporal punishment on any slave, male or female, would subvert the discipline of his estate," declared the Arima slave owners. The abolition of whipping would be "virtually a deprivation of property" in slaves, said their counterparts in North Naparima. "Flogging is the most *humane*, prompt and efficacious mode to crush disorderly behaviour," stated the planters of Pointe-a-Pierre; while W.H. Burnley, the island's largest owner of slaves, felt that the idea of prohibiting the flogging of women was "so monstrous and extraordinary that I hardly know how to approach the subject"; and ending the use of the whip in the field was "a fatal error" in view of the "habits and morals" of the slaves. (C.O. 295/60 and 295/65; Brereton 1989, 58–60)

The traditions and accepted usages of slave control in Trinidad were largely dictated by the French settlers who came to the island after 1777 from the French colonies and Grenada, including a few influential refugees from the slave rebellion in St Domingue (Haiti). With support from the early British governors, especially Picton and Hislop in the years between 1797 and 1811, the brutal methods of controlling slaves which were the norm in the French colonies, above all in Martinique, were introduced here. Of course the British were not exactly backward in such methods, and it is noteworthy that the infamous British tradition of excessive flogging of soldiers was carried on in Trinidad. Every Sunday morning, it seems, soldiers (black and white) were ceremoniously flogged on the parade grounds outside the main military barracks at St Joseph, Port of Spain and St James. Such spectacles no doubt made the even greater brutality meted out to slaves more acceptable. (Naipaul 1973, 185)

While whipping and flogging were routine aspects of the slave system in Trinidad and in Tobago, with both women and men the victims, at least up to 1824, even more horrific punishments were devised for enslaved people accused of crimes. They were the main victims of the refined cruelties devised to terrorise the whole population. In the Port of Spain jail, the keeper received fees for each flogging and mutilation carried out (runaways had their ears cut off). In 1801–02, men and women “convicted” of poisoning livestock and slaves were sentenced to horrific punishments by special “poisoning tribunals” organised by the powerful Martinique-born planter, St Hilaire Begorrat. Torture was used to exact “confessions”. One man, Pierre François, was burnt alive, along with the headless corpse of another, Bouqui, who had been hanged and then decapitated (his head was spiked for public display on the St Joseph road). Besides Bouqui, four others, including a woman (Thisbe), were hanged, decapitated, their bodies publicly burnt and their heads displayed on spikes; those sentenced to lesser punishments were forced to watch the grisly proceedings. Others were branded, flogged, had their ears cut off, and were sold out of the island. That was how they did it in Martinique, where they knew how to keep the slaves under control. When an apparent plot to rebel was discovered among the slaves of the Diego Martin valley at Christmas 1805, the reprisals were similarly brutal. Four were hanged, decapitated, their bodies displayed hanging in chains and their heads spiked at the entrance to their plantations. Many were flogged (up to 100 lashes), mutilated, sold off the island, or forced to wear heavy iron collars or chains for long periods. All this London approved of. (Naipaul 1973, 196–201, 209–14, 291–99; de Verteuil, 1987, 51–54, 63–64, 71–72 and *The Plates* 111; Brereton 1989, 35–40, 47–48).

Of course, these spectacular punishments, intended to terrorise the enslaved people, were not an everyday affair. But violence in the form of regular, routine whippings and floggings was a normal part of the slave system, sanctioned by both law and custom (except during the last ten years of slavery when corporal punishment of women was prohibited and that of men was restricted). So was sexual abuse of enslaved women. It was normative for white men, and indeed for black men in positions of authority such as the drivers or headmen, to coerce sex from enslaved women, regardless of their age or involvement in sexual relationships. A few such women might gain privileges from unions with white men, especially if they were based on some mutual affection and if the men were well-to-do and possessed of some sense of decency. But for the majority, coerced sex and outright rape were part of the violence endemic to slavery.

It seems clear, too, that the conditions of enslavement encouraged “black on black” violence: fighting and assaults between slaves, wife-beating, and excessive punishment of children. Mrs A. C. Carmichael, the wife of a British planter who lived in Trinidad in the 1820s, claimed that slave *parents* objected when the 1824 Order prohibited the owners from flogging women. They objected because they preferred the master to punish their “girls”, knowing that they themselves would flog them far more severely! Though this is a dubious assertion, especially granted that Carmichael’s polemical book was mainly an attempt to discredit the British reform programme, there is little reason to doubt that severe child-beating was a normative feature of slave life. The beating of a child by a parent or relative, of course, was a very different thing from the overseer’s whipping

workers in the field or flogging slaves as a punishment for offences; but it seems very likely that such beatings were often quite severe, originating an African-Trinidadian tradition of excessive corporal punishment of children. As Naipaul puts it, the “drama of the plantation whip” was transmuted into community and family rituals of punishment. (Naipaul 1973, 373, 384–86; Carmichael 1834, Vol.11, 140–47)

### **The violence of indenture**

Violence in the sense of outright kidnapping of persons for forced transportation and labour, and in the sense of a legally sanctioned right to inflict corporal punishment on indentured workers, was not as salient in the system of Indian indentured immigration to Trinidad (1845–1917) as it had been in African slavery. Employers of indentured labour had no legal right to flog or whip their workers; the main legal sanction for the enforcement of the indenture laws was prosecution in the courts, followed by fines or (more likely) jail sentences. Incarceration in jail as a criminal, for breaches of the indenture laws which were really civil offences, was the major form of *legal* “violence” against the indentured Indians—the jail substituted for the whip. Nevertheless, physical violence against indentureds on the Trinidad plantations enjoyed customary, if not legal, sanction; and Indian workers, including some who had served out their contracts, were routinely beaten, cuffed and kicked by managers, overseers, sirdars (Indian foremen, the successors to the slave drivers) and, at times, African labourers or policemen. In the towns, the few Indians who lived or worked there (usually as porters, gardeners or domestics) during the period of immigration were often the victims of casual brutality from Africans or others, including policemen.

As Trotman has shown, a great deal of (extralegal) violence was inflicted on the bodies of the “bound Coolies”, and the perpetrators were rarely punished, even when death resulted. In 1867 Soudar Singh was severely beaten by the owner of his estate and seven African labourers; they were all acquitted. In 1871 an estate manager was fined six pounds for horse-whipping two Indian women, one of whom subsequently died. This woman, Labjadee, was whipped and kicked on three consecutive days. The manager was not even *charged* with manslaughter because of medical evidence that she was in poor health before the whippings. In 1899, a woman called Sahti died 14 days after a beating by the son of the estate owner; he was charged with manslaughter but the coroner’s verdict was death from natural causes. “East Indians could be whipped, kicked and beaten to death with impunity,” Trotman concludes. This was violence against Indian workers on the estates, sanctioned not by law but by the brutal customs of plantation life and found all over the British Empire where indentured Indians were employed under white management. The most spectacular incident of violence against Indians in Trinidad, however, was the Muharran (Hosay) massacre in 1884, when at least 16 persons were killed and over 100 injured when the police fired on persons taking part in Hosay processions who were trying (as had become customary) to enter the town of San Fernando. (Trotman 1986, 139–42; Singh 1988, *passim*)

Some Indians retaliated against estate owners, plantation staff and African or Indian foremen. In 1870, two indentureds were convicted of the murder of an African foreman on Macoya estate; they were sentenced to death, but the governor commuted the

sentence. In 1911, on the Sainte Marie estate, 11 indentureds beat an Indian sirdar to death over a wage dispute. But the more common pattern was for the Indians to vent their aggression and frustration against the weaker members of their own community, above all, but not only, the women. As Mahabir has expressed it poetically (based on oral testimony from surviving immigrants): “Indian must fight/if e play bad/e start to fight/ if e do wrong/ e start to cut e arse/dat time so/no Indian cyan play bad/beat e arse/if e run away nex man daughter/e go beat e arse too/if you have to run way wid man wife/leave one time/dat man go kill e wife/kill two a dem.” (Trotman 1986, 141–42; Mahabir 1985, 56)

Indians in Trinidad soon acquired a reputation for violence, including murder, against members of their own community. In the 1880s they committed sixty percent of all murders in the colony, while constituting only about thirty per cent of the total population; in the 1890s the figure was seventy per cent. The great majority of their victims were fellow Indians, and most were women. Between 1872 and 1880, 22 Indians were murdered by Indians, and all the victims were women; between 1901 and 1910, 62 Indians were murdered by Indians, with 20 of the victims women. Between 1872 and 1900, there were 87 murders of Indian women, of which 65 were “wife-murders”. The tragic “Coolie wife-murders” reflected the skewed sex ratio on the plantations during the period of indentured immigration, the abnormal living conditions in the estate barracks, the disruption of traditional gender relations and patterns of marriage, and the concentration of young single males competing for the small number of Indian girls and women of marriageable age. Women who left their mates for another man—or were believed to have done so—were often the victims of homicidal rage by jealous and frustrated men; these men were usually tried and convicted for murder and duly hanged. Inward looking violence was also inflicted on Indian men, with the ubiquitous plantation tool, the cutlass, the weapon of choice. Disputes over dowry and marriage, over land and wages, could all lead to violence and murders. Moreover, suicide by male immigrants was quite common, suggesting again an inward looking violence, and often apparently linked to marital disputes and jealousy. (Trotman 1986, 169–75; Brereton 1979, 182–83; Reddock 1994, 34–35, 44–45; Mohammed 2002, 45–46, 155, 169, 180–81, 186–92, 202–05)

The plantation barracks during the period of indentured immigration were a fertile breeding ground for Indian-on-Indian violence; the incidence of such crimes, especially the “wife-murders”, declined significantly when large numbers of Indians moved off the estates to settle in independent villages and peasant communities. Declined, but certainly did not end. Violent crimes by Indian men against women continued to be a tragic feature of the post-indenture ethnic community, as Patricia Mohammed shows in her study of that community in the period 1917–47. A characteristic case occurred in 1919: “On Sunday morning Palwan, immigrant on Exchange Estate, killed his wife Mukdeah with a cutlass. It is stated that the parties were not on good terms. Palwan was jealous of his wife who was about to leave him to live with some other women on the estate. This annoyed Palwan and it is alleged that he seized his cutlass in one hand and the woman by her hair with the other, and inflicted three fatal blows on the neck while severing the head from the body while he held her down...” Mohammed shows that the number of such

cases reported after 1920, when all indentures were terminated, consistently decreased; but this certainly does not indicate that there was a reduction in the actual numbers of violent assaults on Indian women by Indian men. Many such cases never reached the courts, or the newspapers. “Violence as a means of control and a male assurance of continued ownership of women as property persisted,” Mohammed concludes, “and was manifested through murders, woundings, beatings and threats to Indian women.” (Mohammed 2002, 103–04, 189–90, 192, 210–13)

### **A culture of violence, 1840s–1950s**

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Trinidad, states Trotman, was “a violent society”, with a “high incidence of crimes against the person and other forms of violence”. The legacy of history and the nature of the colony’s society bred “a pattern of violence which was both impulsive and implosive: that is, it manifested itself as the violent actions of irrational men [and women] wreaking havoc on themselves rather than on the source of their frustrations and oppression.” Slavery had been intensely violent, indenture only a degree less so. Colonialism rested on racism which meant “separate and unequal” treatment for the non-white majority, psychological violence against the “inferior” groups, and disrespect for the culture of the people. This was a climate in which violence (physical and psychological) could thrive. Colonialism and racism made possible atrocious living conditions and a low quality of life, which in turn promoted a milieu in which violence and aggression were salient. (Trotman 1986, 134–39)

Slavery was ended in the 1830s, indentured immigration in 1917, but colonialism rested in the final analysis on force, on the infliction or threat of official violence against the people. Official violence was a reality in colonial Trinidad. Policemen and at times troops were ordered to fire on protestors and demonstrators and deaths and injuries resulted; subsequent enquiries rarely apportioned blame to the men who did the shooting or gave the orders. In 1884, as we already noted, at least 16 Indians were killed, and over 100 injured, in the Hosay massacre outside San Fernando. In 1903, 16 men and women were killed and 43 injured in the Water Riots in Port of Spain, when the police fired on, and in some cases bayoneted, rioters in the area of the Red House. These victims were urban blacks. And in 1937, during the island-wide strikes and riots associated with Butler, 12 civilians were killed and 50 injured (African and Indian) by police action (two policemen were killed, and nine policemen or Volunteers injured, by the rioters). (Singh 1988, *passim*; Brereton 1989, 149–51, 180–81)

Though British troops or naval personnel could be summoned in a grave emergency, as in June 1937, it was of course the colonial police force which inflicted official violence as a rule. It is not surprising that the police were hated and despised by the ordinary people of all ethnic backgrounds during this period. The force was reorganised in the last third of the nineteenth century along the lines of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), as a paramilitary force operating in a society where large segments of the population were opposed to the system of law and justice the police were defending, as—in effect—an alien occupying army. Non-commissioned officers (NCOs)—sergeants and corporals—from the RIC were imported into Trinidad and soon became the men who really ran the local police force and created its professional ethos. The officers were all white—English



or Irish; the NCOs were mostly Irish, ex-RIC; and the rank and file were nearly all from the smaller islands. In 1895, out of 537 “other ranks”, 301 were Barbadians, only 47 had been born in Trinidad, and there were no Indians. Poor working conditions, low educational levels and minimal pay, along with the foreign origin of the great majority, all encouraged a tradition of brutality and abuse of power on the part of the local policemen, who earned a well-deserved reputation for being rough, unsavoury characters who had often “left their country for their country’s good”. On a day-to-day basis, Trinidadians of the working classes, African and Indian, were subjected to violence of different kinds from these agents of the colonial state. They often retaliated. In 1891, for instance, an Irish sergeant was critically wounded and other policemen injured when they tried to stop an illegal drum dance at Arouca. (Trotman 1986, 95–102, 284; Brereton 1979, 12728)

Official violence might include the infliction of corporal punishment, an immensely emotive issue in a society of ex-slaves, for fairly minor offences. Ordinance 6 of 1868—just thirty years after the end of slavery—allowed corporal punishment for praedial larceny and the practice of Obeah. In 1882, one person was sentenced to four floggings of 36 lashes each by a Couva magistrate; it was the governor who remitted three of them. A petition organised by a Methodist minister in 1883 to abolish flogging (“the great and disgusting vice of slavery in the brutal practice of flogging to blood the labouring population for petty larceny and other crimes”) failed completely; indeed, a 1893 Ordinance actually extended the practice by making flogging mandatory for a second conviction for praedial larceny. (Brereton 1979, 126–27)

Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the incidence of violence against the person was relatively high in this period, especially in Port of Spain and the other urban areas. Trotman shows, for instance, that over 16 months in 1870–71, there were 445 court cases of assault against the person brought in Port of Spain alone, the vast majority “by and between” working-class individuals and located in the barrack-yards and tenements where the urban poor crowded together. This was typical of what Trotman terms “implosive” violence, turned inward on the oppressed community. Guns were relatively widespread in Trinidad at this time, triggering an 1877 Ordinance imposing registration and a licence fee on gun-owners; but for the most part violent crime did not involve shooting. On the plantations the cutlass was the weapon of choice. Elsewhere, knives, razors, sticks and stones, as well as fists, feet and heads, were generally used. Barbadian immigrants were blamed for introducing the razor to working-class Creoles as a useful weapon, and “cutting and wounding” became a typical form of urban violence. (Trotman 1986, 143–45; Brereton 1979, 126)

Almost certainly the incidence of violence in the urban areas increased from the 1880s onwards, the result of increased population as people flocked in from the countryside to escape the effects of the sugar depression, and as immigrants from many places, but especially the eastern Caribbean islands (including Tobago), came to Trinidad. Overcrowding in the urban slums worsened, while conditions on the estates also deteriorated. Many of the urban poor were chronically unemployed, or at best found odd, irregular jobs. The cramped, unsanitary barracks in the towns, especially the colonial

capital, with their tiny tenement rooms and teeming open yards, were notorious breeding grounds for crimes of violence and dangerous quarrels. Alcohol use was widespread and often precipitated violence. These brutal living conditions, which probably worsened between the 1880s and the 1930s, encouraged fights and violent quarrels. The period 1875 to 1899 saw an annual average of 240 *jail committals* for fighting (the number of *convictions* for this offence was much higher, for many paid fines rather than go to jail). (Trotman 1986, 146–69; Brereton 1979, 116–120; Cummings 2004, *passim*)

Many of the men and women habitually before the magistrates for crimes of violence belonged to the urban “bands”, or gangs, whose members were loosely described as *jamettes* and *badjohns*. It was especially at Carnival time that clashes between rival bands caused an increase in crimes of violence, but they could occur all year round. The female *jamettes* were famous for violent quarrels with each other and for larger-scale clashes during Carnival. Stick-fighting, the favourite sport of the band members, was quite violent in this period, with serious injuries common. *Canboulay*, the night-time procession of men armed with sticks and carrying *flambeaux*, which opened the Carnival on the Sunday night, before its suppression in the early 1880s, was often the occasion for injuries and arrests. As is well known, the *Canboulay* men inflicted serious damage on Captain Baker’s policemen when they tried to stop the procession during the 1881 Carnival. There is no doubt that the working-class districts of Port of Spain and (perhaps to a lesser extent) other towns were fairly violent places in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. (Brereton 1979, 124–25, 128–29; Trotman 1986, 167–69, 180–82)

It was out of this urban matrix that the steelband violence emerged in the 1940s–50s. The newly created steelbands clashed over territorial rivalries (just like the late nineteenth-century bands), over women, over musical disputes, and over unpopular decisions by the judges at pan competitions. As in the period of the *jamette* Carnival, the festival provided the main arena for these clashes, which could attain considerable proportions. The accounts of these fights indicate that it was supporters or followers rather than the *pannists* who usually initiated the violence, but once started everyone joined in, using cutlasses, knives, razors, bottles and stones as the main weapons. Injuries were common though fatalities were quite rare. Serious clashes began in the 1947 Carnival and worsened in the late 1940s, with long-running feuds like that between *Invaders* and *Casablanca* causing major affrays, many injuries and hundreds of arrests. Efforts by the *pannists* themselves, and by middle-class supporters, did lead to an attenuation of the violence in the 1950s. But the special “Coronation Carnival” in 1953 was marked by eight major clashes, about 200 injuries, and the fatal beating of a car driver in the middle of a steelband fight. According to the newspaper accounts, the “proletarian” bands deliberately targeted the “social” bands—middle-class youths who were apparently getting the gigs at the clubs and dances at the expense of the grass-roots bands—and attacked them with baseball bats, sticks, bottles, whips, razors and cutlasses. Not until the late 1950s was steelband violence at Carnival more or less contained. (Stuempfle 1995, 60–64, 86–94, 110–112)

We have noted that the severe corporal punishment of children was, at least in part, probably a legacy of slavery traditions, as well as of exaggerated Christian notions of “sparing the rod and spoiling the child”. It continued to be normative among all groups in the post-slavery period, but especially among African-Trinidadians. Severe and prolonged beatings of children by mothers, fathers and other relatives, often conducted in public (in the yard or on the street) with an admiring audience, sometimes with a ritualistic or even theatrical element, remained a feature of the culture. Indo-Trinidadian parents were also enthusiastic beaters of children, though perhaps with less of the public performance aspect. This routine brutalisation of children (including the very young) by parents and relatives had other causes also. Men and women were, no doubt, venting their frustrations on small, defenceless, easily accessible victims. But it was also probably an unconscious or conscious process of initiating the child into a harsh world, teaching him or her to suppress individuality and aggression, to know his or her place. And certainly there was an element of public performance and ritual. No doubt the violent norms of slavery and indenture lay behind this kind of “performance”, as well as the very “public” lives of the barrack-yard dwellers. (Brereton 1979, 121–22; Trotman 1986, 174–77; Cummings 2004, *passim*)

Of course, as Trotman reminds us, corporal punishment of children was also a staple of the colonial school system (as indeed it was in Britain in the nineteenth century). Virtually all teachers, at all levels of the educational system, used the strap or whip, and were encouraged to do so by the pedagogical principles of the day. Many teachers saw themselves more or less as lion-tamers, struggling to keep little savages under control. Though the great majority of the teachers were black or mixed-race, with some Indians by the early 1900s, they had no doubt internalised the racism of the period and sincerely believed that African and Indian children had to have “learning” beaten into them. And the whip was the teacher’s badge of authority in a world where black or brown men and women enjoyed few other forms of prestige or privilege. Beaten at home, in the yard and in the schoolroom, it is hardly surprising that the young colonials grew up with a firm commitment to physical punishment as a mode of control.

These aspects of the society also help us to understand the ubiquity of violence against women, especially “wife-beating”, among all the social and ethnic groups. It went almost unchallenged and virtually uncriticised; it was often carried out in public (especially among Africans), and an element of ritual and performance might also be present. Calypsos of the first half of the twentieth century illustrate how pervasive, and how accepted, was the culture of violence in marital or common-law relationships among all sectors of the society. Not until the mid-1950s did a women’s group—the Caribbean Women’s National Assembly led by Christina Lewis—campaign against attacks and assaults on women and girls. (Reddock 1994, 251; Cummings 2009, 57–66)

Indian men perhaps outdid the Africans in wife-beating, often precipitated by the consumption of alcohol on plantation pay days, so that “Saturday night beatings” became almost a domestic routine in many Indian households. Mohammed’s oral testimonies reveal a kind of fatalism among the women who suffered from spousal abuse of this sort. “If your husband drinking rum in a shop you can’t go,” one such woman said. “You just

have to stop home and till he come and if he come he quarrel or he eh quarrel, he beat you or he eh beat you, or he go and sleep..." Mohammed concludes that "women were forced to undergo ritual beatings from their husbands as part of the marital contract"; male control was enforced by alcohol-fuelled violence. Moreover, marital rape—or at best, sex demanded by a drunk and violent husband—was also a routine feature of many Indian marriages. But whether perpetrated by Africans, Indians, or others, whether carried out in the yard, on the street or in the domestic space, wife-beating was virtually a norm in the society, and intervention was frowned on except when it seemed that the victim was in actual danger of death. The home was no refuge from violence in colonial Trinidad. (Mohammed 2002, 169–70, 212–13)

### **Violence in Tobago**

Colonial Trinidad was, unquestionably, a violent society. Tobago, joined to Trinidad administratively in two stages between 1889 and 1898, was perhaps less violent if only because of its stronger rural and peasant ethos and its more cohesive village and church-based culture. Yet slavery in Tobago was every bit as brutal as in Trinidad, perhaps more so, and lasted longer too. In 1819, Tobago's slave population had the lowest rate of natural increase and the highest crude death rate in the whole of the British Caribbean, and its 39% decline in the period 1807–34 was the greatest in the region. Physical violence against the enslaved was routine; a British eye-witness told a 1790 parliamentary committee that "the greater part of the plantation Negroes" he saw in Tobago "were marked with the whip". No wonder that when Emancipation finally came, Tobago ex-slaves sang "No mo' driver's lash for me/ No mo', no mo'/ Many a t'ousan' gone." (Craig-James 2008, Vol. 1, 36, 55, 66)

Tobago also developed a tradition of violent resistance to enslavement that has no parallel in Trinidad. A major rising in 1770, led by an African known to us only by his slave name Sandy, and taking place only six years after the real start of plantation development in the island, saw at least twenty whites killed. It raged for six weeks before it was crushed. There were risings in 1771, 1773 and 1774. Savage reprisals and brutal punishments followed these heroic but doomed rebellions. In 1774, seven of the captured rebels had their right arms amputated and were then burnt alive, in public of course; Sampson, a ringleader, was hung alive in chains, taking seven days to die. Even after the last major rising in 1801, by which time the British authorities were becoming more squeamish about savage public spectacles in their dominions, several rebels were decapitated and their heads were mounted on poles in the centre of Scarborough as a gruesome deterrent. (Craig-James 2008, Vol. 1, 56–57)

After Emancipation, the Tobago masses continued to protest injustices and oppression, violently at times. In 1853, prisoners in the Scarborough jail rioted, seizing cutlasses, stones and other weapons, forcing all the warders to flee; soldiers from the garrison had to be called in. In 1867 there was a riot at Mason Hall, close to Scarborough, against an oppressive and unreasonable tax on dog ownership. Some one hundred villagers, armed with cutlasses, sticks, stones and "bludgeons", beat up the policemen who tried to enforce the law. The largest post-Emancipation protest, the "Belmanna Riots" of 1876 in the Roxborough area, involved the brutal murder of Corporal J.H. Belmanna by a mob of

labourers enraged at the earlier firing on a hostile crowd, which had resulted in the death of a woman. The rioters described their actions as “war”—war against the planters and their agents—and it was known as the “Belmanna War” throughout Tobago. (Craig-James 2008: Vol. 1, 140–41, 240–41, 243, 249–51)

Despite this robust tradition of resistance against slavery and post-Emancipation oppression, Tobago was a less violent society than Trinidad in the decades between the 1880s or 1890s and the 1950s. Susan Craig-James notes that “serious crime was rare” in the first half of the twentieth century. At this time it was common that, when the chief justice came for the Scarborough session of the colonial Supreme Court, there were no cases for trial or appeal. This was “a homogeneous society with strong social ties,” Craig-James states; intra-village ties were pervasive and powerful, and in the small-scale, close-knit, “face to face” village societies, behavioural norms were strongly entrenched and effectively sanctioned. Those who flouted the accepted norms tended to leave Tobago for Trinidad, or further afield. This village society, based as it was on land ownership and own-account farming and marketing, was powerfully shaped both by African traditions of communal solidarity and respect for elders, and by the moral teachings of nineteenth-century Protestant Christianity. Both traditions inhibited criminality and social disorder. Moreover, Tobago remained essentially rural until after the 1950s, and Scarborough was hardly more than a village itself. It was the absence of significant urban slums, the more homogeneous society, the rural and village culture, the widespread land-holding though cash-poor peasantry, of the period from the 1890s to the 1950s, which made Tobago culture in general less violent than that of Trinidad up to the mid-twentieth century. (Craig-James Vol. 2, 40–41)

Sadly, in the second half of the last century, and especially since the 1980s, this picture has changed. As the cohesive village society based on peasant farming and independent own-account activity has collapsed, as the Christian and communal traditions of that society have weakened, Tobago has begun to approach Trinidad in terms of violent crime and other forms of social disorder. But this is largely a development of the period since 1990. (Craig-James 2008: Vol. 2, 235–37, 240–43) Up to the 1950s, though far from a wholly “tranquil” place, Tobago was clearly a more orderly and a less violent society in comparison with the larger island to which she had been joined at the end of the nineteenth century.

### **Conclusion**

This article has tried to demonstrate the historical foundations of a culture of violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Colonial society began in an orgy of violence against the indigenous people, and was consolidated through the exceptional brutality of the slave system. Enslavement was abolished in the 1830s, but it was replaced by indentured immigration, another system of coerced labour, though admittedly less violent than slavery. By the middle of the twentieth century, a culture of violence was clearly entrenched in the colony, even if it had not yet taken on all the characteristics of the contemporary (early 21<sup>st</sup> century) period. While the culture of violence in many respects transcended both ethnicity and gender, there is no doubt that a gender dimension was salient. Violence against women, especially murderous attacks and marital abuse (“wife-

beating”) by men, was a pervasive feature of the society, and the latter at least was widely accepted, by women as well as by men. Violence against children, meted out by men and women who were their parents or care-givers, and by teachers, was equally pervasive, and even more strongly supported and condoned. These tragic historical legacies helped to shape the current crisis of crime and violence in Trinidad and Tobago.

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