



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago



CELEBRATING OUR
Ancestral Roots

YOUR STORY, OUR HISTORY

A journey to our past to discover the
origins of our ethnic diversity.



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Our First Peoples



The first people to settle Trinidad arrived on foot from South America around 10,000 years ago, when the island was still joined to the mainland. They reached Tobago later, coming from Trinidad by boat. Over the next thousands of years, many groups from South America arrived by sea including the Nepoyos, the Chaguanes, Kalinago (or Island Caribs), the Lokono or Arawaks, the Chaima, the Warao, and others. These were our "First Peoples", whose legacy today is seen in place names like Chaguanas and Arima, in our food, and in our culture. Many people today have First Peoples' ancestry even if they don't know it!



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The First Europeans in Trinidad



The Spanish were the first Europeans to come to Trinidad. Though Columbus claimed Trinidad for Spain in 1498, it was not until 1592 that a permanent settlement was set up at St Joseph. Trinidad became a Spanish colony, part of the extensive Spanish Empire in the Americas. The few Spanish settlers, plus Christian missionaries sent from Spain, tried to control the First Peoples and to convert them to their Catholic faith, though the First Peoples resisted fiercely. For nearly 200 years (1592-1783), Trinidad was a poor, remote and neglected Spanish colony.



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The First Europeans in Tobago



Columbus saw Tobago in 1498, and claimed it for Spain, but it was never actually settled by the Spanish. The first Europeans to settle in Tobago were the Dutch, who set up a colony with enslaved Africans in the 1600s. Another group of early settlers were the Courlanders, from modern Latvia, near Russia. However, both the Dutch and the Courlander colonies had ended by about 1690. It was the arrival of the British from 1763, that began the permanent settlement of Tobago with sugar plantations worked by enslaved Africans. The British governed Tobago as a separate colony with its own elected Assembly. France and Britain both ruled the island at different times between 1763 and 1814, when it was permanently ceded to Britain.



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The French and the shaping of Trinidad's Economy

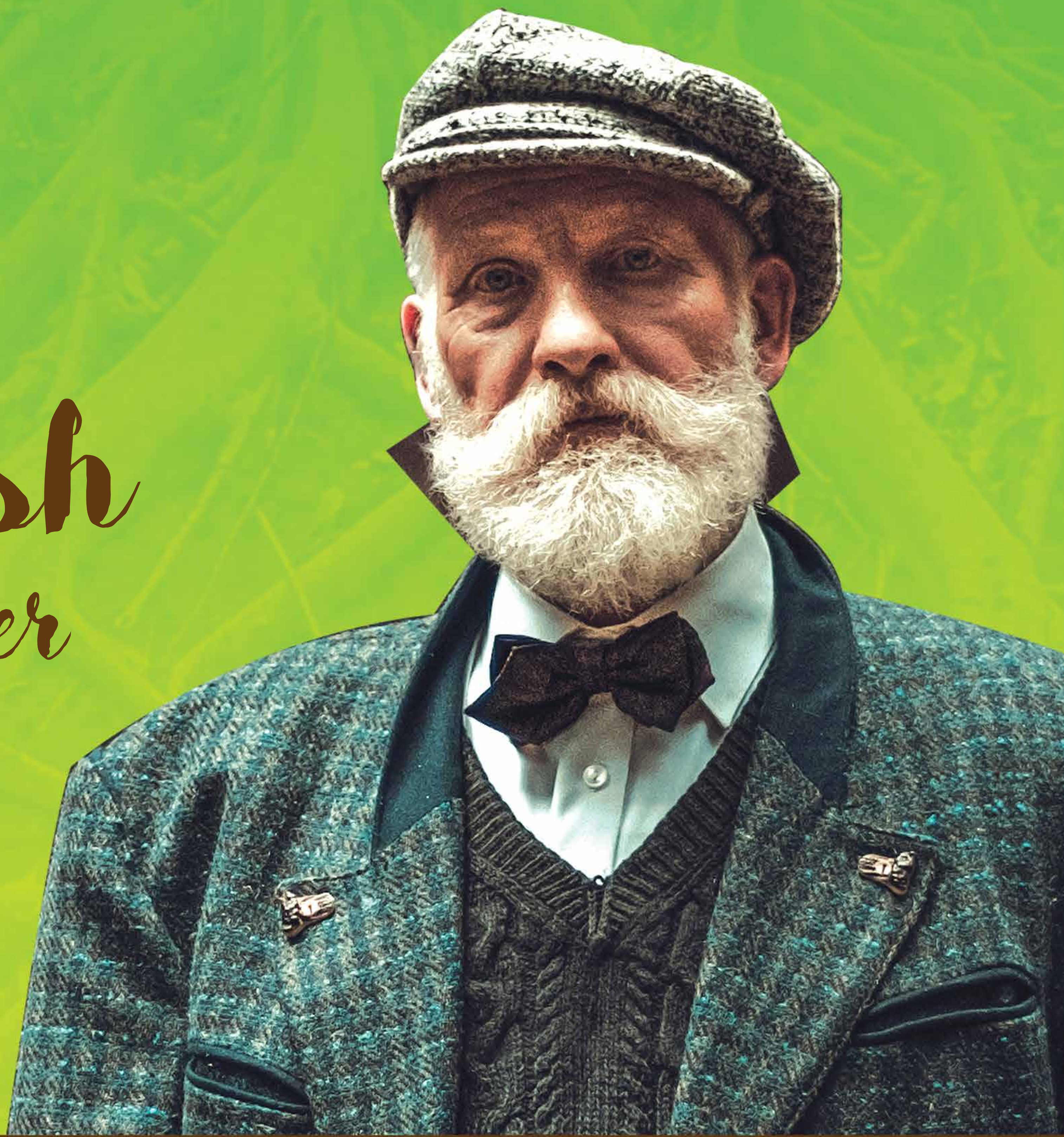


Trinidad was never a French colony, but French influences on our culture are strong. This is due to the Spanish government's invitation, under the 1783 Cedula of Population, for French planters to settle Trinidad and make it a flourishing plantation economy. They were offered land and other incentives to come, bringing their enslaved workers, their money, and their experience in growing sugar, cotton, coffee and other crops. These immigrants, coming from the French Caribbean colonies, Grenada, and France, were both white and "free coloured" (people of mixed African and European descent who were not enslaved). Together they and their enslaved workers transformed Trinidad into a plantation economy and a slave society in the years after 1783.



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The British take over



Trinidad was a Spanish colony from 1592 to 1797. But in 1797, during a war between Britain and Spain, the British captured Trinidad, which was formally granted to Britain in 1802. Thereafter, Trinidad became part of the expanding British Empire until 1962. The sugar plantation economy was further developed using enslaved labour, and later indentured labour. English, Scottish and Irish planters, businessmen and officials arrived here in the 1800s, and our laws and government system were reformed along British lines. The English language gradually replaced Spanish, French and Créole (Patois).



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*Africans
arrive in
great numbers*



The new plantations developed in Tobago after 1763, and in Trinidad after 1783, were worked by enslaved Africans, who soon came to form a majority of the people in both islands. Some came to Trinidad with their French enslavers while others were brought directly from West and Central Africa via the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, surviving the brutal Middle Passage. These enslaved Africans, and their locally-born children, built up and worked the two islands' plantations. They ensured that African culture, languages and religion would have a significant influence in each island.



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Free Africans in Trinidad & Tobago

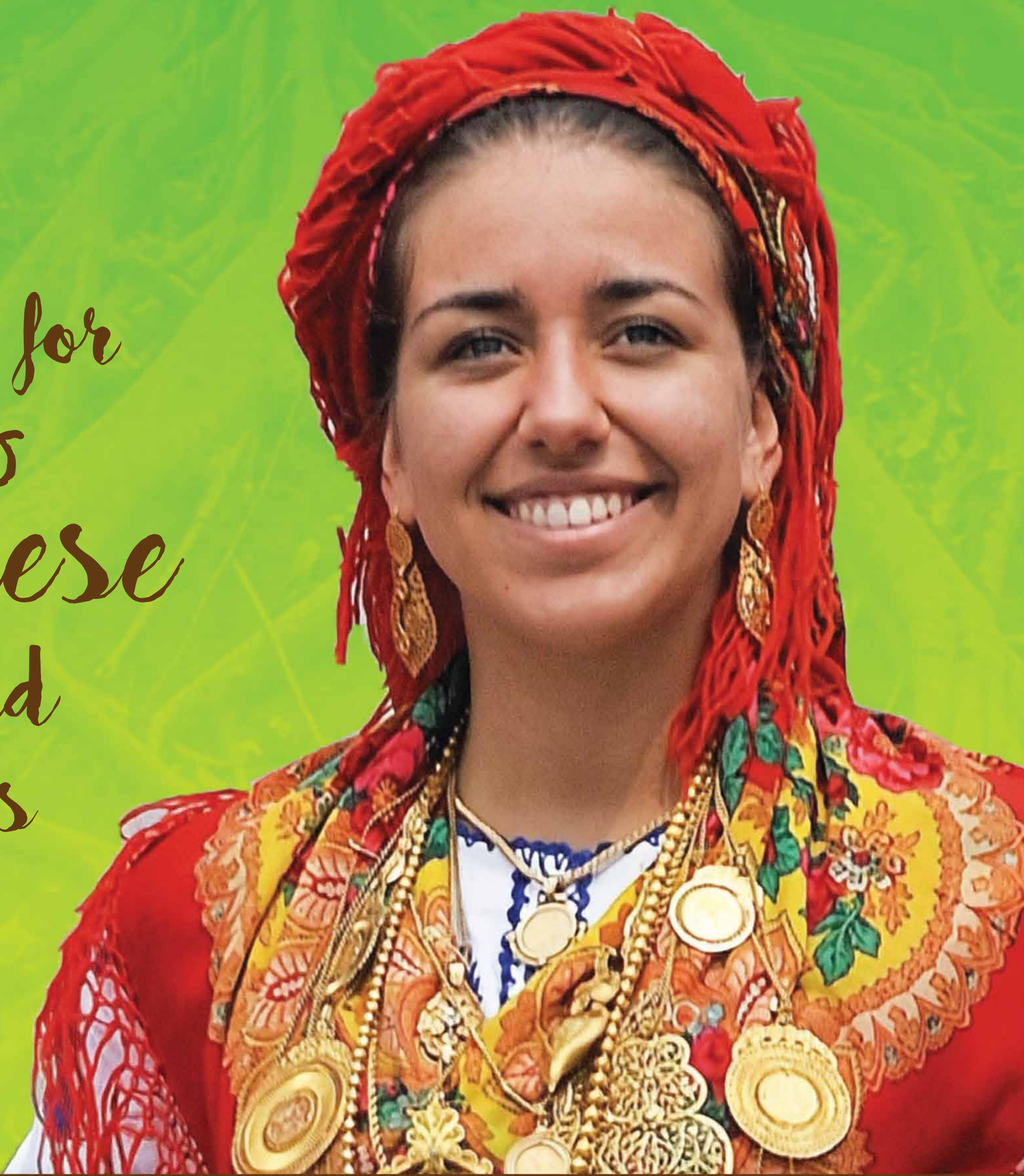


Not all Africans living in Trinidad before the end of slavery were enslaved. Trinidad had several groups of free Africans. There was a large “free coloured” and “free black” population there—Tobago’s was a much smaller number. There were the “Merikins”, former enslaved Africans in the Southern USA, who had fought for Britain in a war in 1812-14, and were settled in the “Company Villages” in South Trinidad. There were the former soldiers of the West India Regiments who were settled after 1815 in villages around Sangre Grande and Manzanilla. There were the “Mandingos”, Muslim Africans who had bought their own freedom and were living in and around Port of Spain. And after Emancipation, many “liberated Africans” came to both islands between 1840 and 1860 as indentured, not enslaved, immigrants.



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The search for labour & Portuguese indentured labourers



The British made the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans illegal in 1806/07, but they did not end the system of enslavement itself until 1834-1838, in two stages. In the years after "full freedom" in 1838, many of the former enslaved Africans in Trinidad moved away from the sugar plantations, and even those who continued on refused to accept the very long hours and poor conditions which the planters offered. As a result, planters and the British authorities explored various options to source cheap labour. After 1838, a few hundred Portuguese people came to Trinidad from Madeira, an island in the Atlantic belonging to Portugal. They generally did not work on the sugar plantations for long, becoming market gardeners, domestic servants, and small shopkeepers. Today quite a few Trinbagonians are proud to have Madeiran Portuguese ancestry.

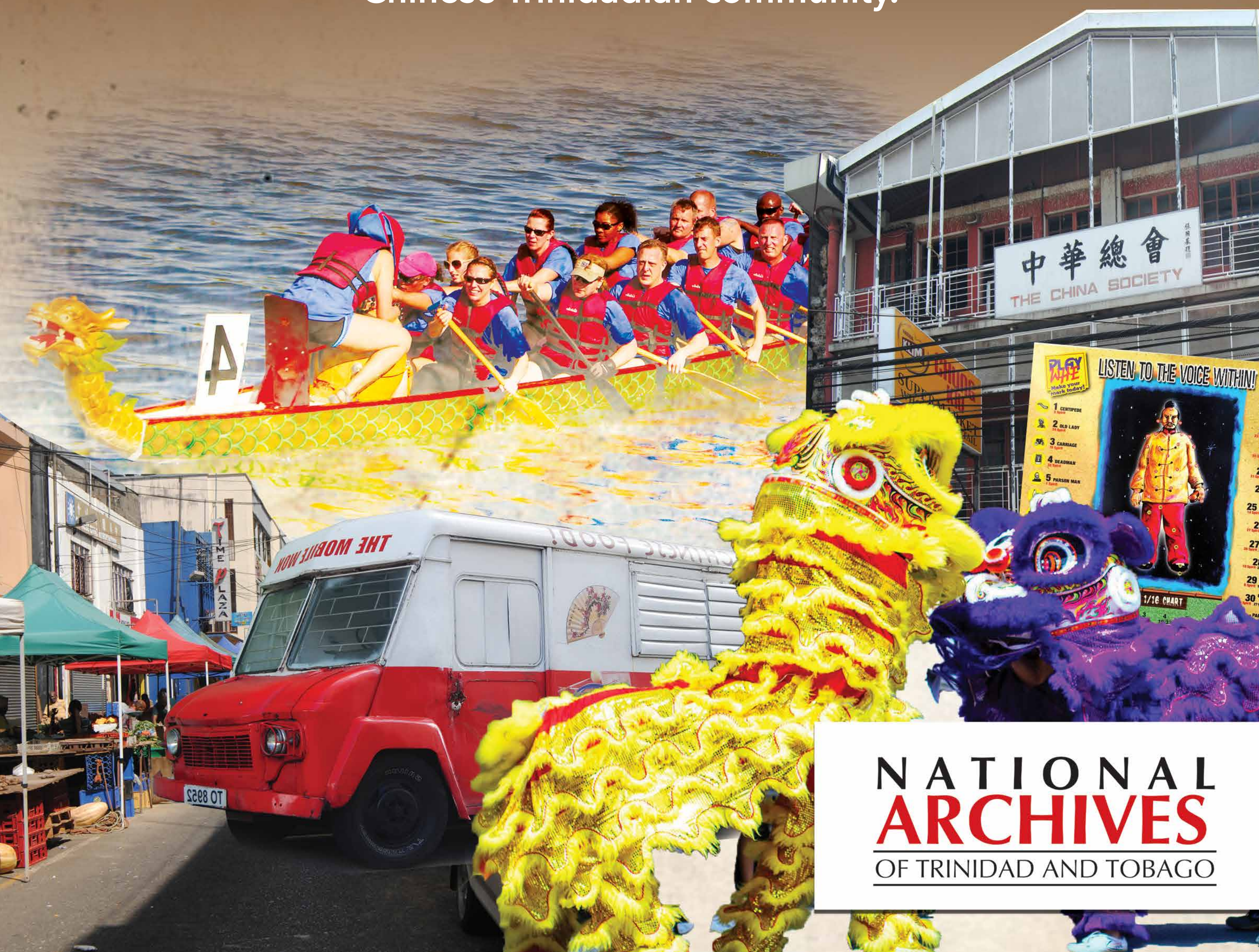


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Chinese in Trinidad



China is very far from Trinidad, yet in 1806, a few Chinese men were brought here as workers; most of them soon left the island. Then, between 1853 and 1866, after the end of slavery, about 2,500 indentured immigrants from China's Guangdong Province arrived to work on the Trinidad sugar estates. After their indenture was over, most became market gardeners, butchers and small shopkeepers. But most Chinese people came later, in the 1900s, not as indentured immigrants but to join relatives or to escape poverty and war in China. Today we have a small but vibrant Chinese-Trinidadian community.



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Indian indentured labour



It was India, much of which was under British control in the 1800s, which would provide the great majority of the indentured immigrants for Trinidad. Between 1845 and 1917, about 147,000 people, men, women and some children, came mainly from North India under the indentureship scheme. Most were Hindus but there was also a small group of Muslims. Most worked on the sugar estates, others on the cocoa and coconut plantations. Most served five-year indentures, and after ten years' residence in Trinidad, they were entitled to return passages—but only roughly one-third took up this option. Their presence ensured that Indian culture - their religions, food, clothing and festivals - would leave a significant mark on our society.



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Venezuelans & the cocoa industry



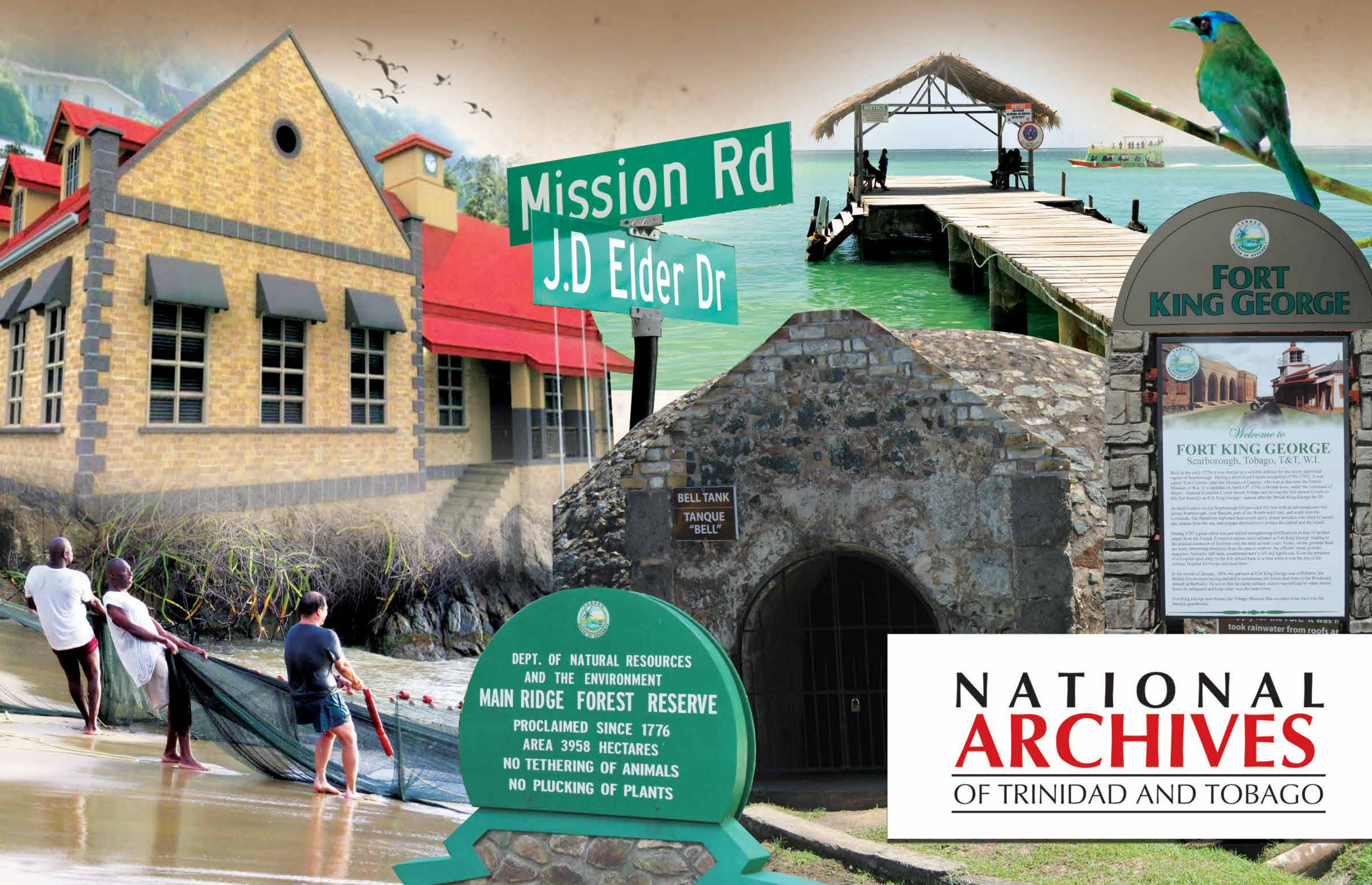
All through the 1800s, many people from nearby Venezuela came to live in Trinidad as free (not indentured) immigrants. Most were of mixed Spanish/First Peoples/African descent; they spoke Spanish and were Roman Catholics. They generally worked in the cocoa industry as labourers and peasants, and are sometimes called "cocoa panyols." In fact, they helped to make the cocoa industry flourish in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when it overtook sugar as Trinidad's most important crop. These immigrants brought traditions like parang, and helped to keep our Spanish heritage alive.



Tobago joins Trinidad

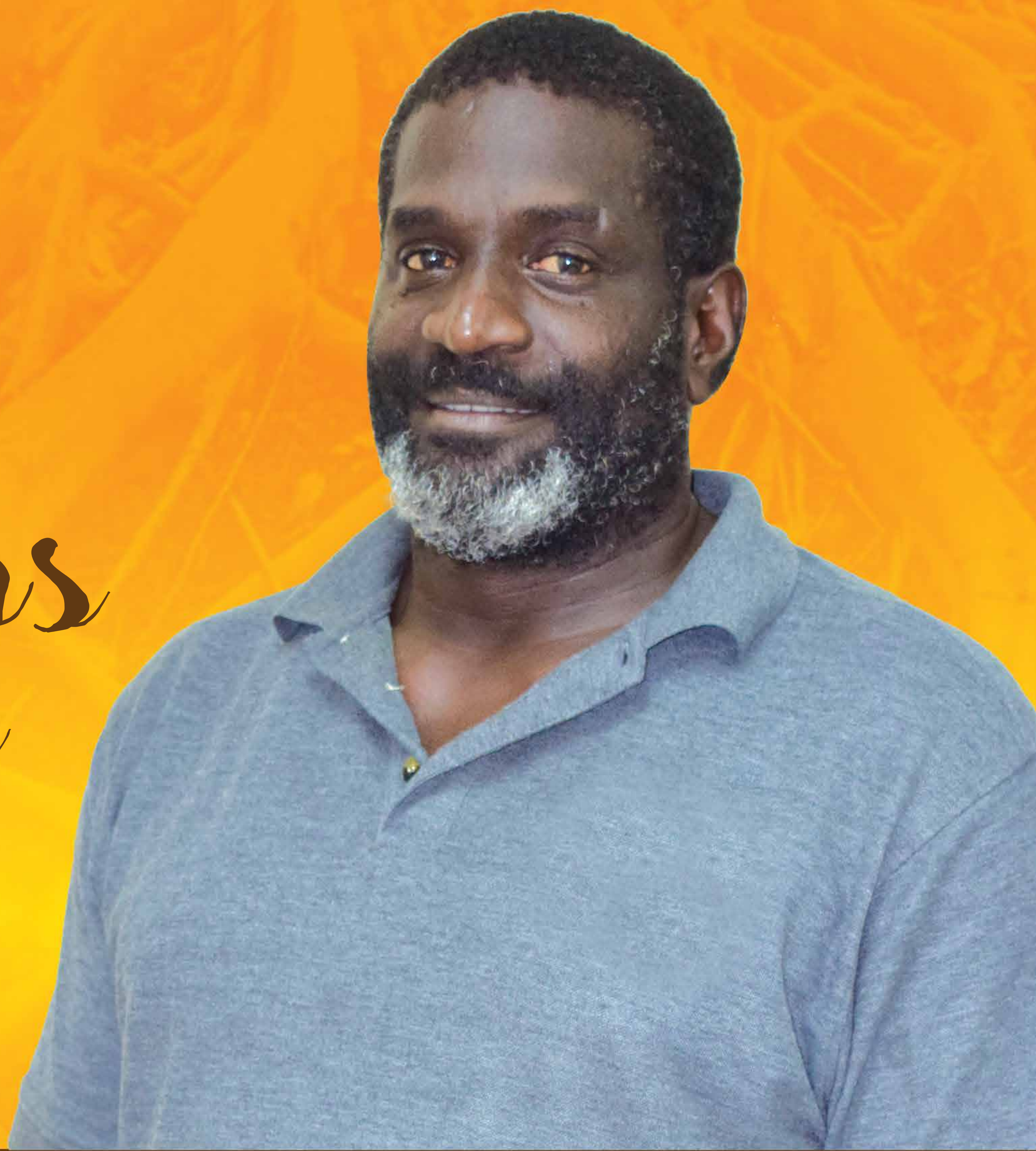


After the end of slavery, Tobago's economy steadily declined. In 1885, Tobago became part of the Windward Islands government, along with Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent. But then Britain decided to link it to the larger and more prosperous Trinidad. A new Colony, Trinidad and Tobago, was created in 1889. For a few years, Tobago kept some self-governing powers. But in 1899, it was made a Ward (administrative district) of Trinidad and Tobago. Some Tobagonians welcomed the union because they saw opportunities for them—migrating to Trinidad to live and work, or selling their farm produce in Port of Spain. But all through the 1900s, Tobago's political status in the union was a serious issue for its people. In 1980, the Tobago House of Assembly was established with local government powers.



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West Indians and oil



The first oil well was drilled in 1867 in Aripero, but commercial exploitation of Trinidad's oil began in the early 1900s, in the Guayaguayare area. The industry grew fast, with the development of the motor car, and with ships and machines now using oil. Trinidad became an important exporter of oil, especially during World War II (1939-1945). After the war, wells were drilled in the sea as well as on land, and our refineries were expanded. Thousands of immigrants from the Eastern Caribbean islands came to work in the oil industry in the 1900s, though they had been arriving here ever since the end of slavery in the 1830s.



Syrian & Lebanese arrive

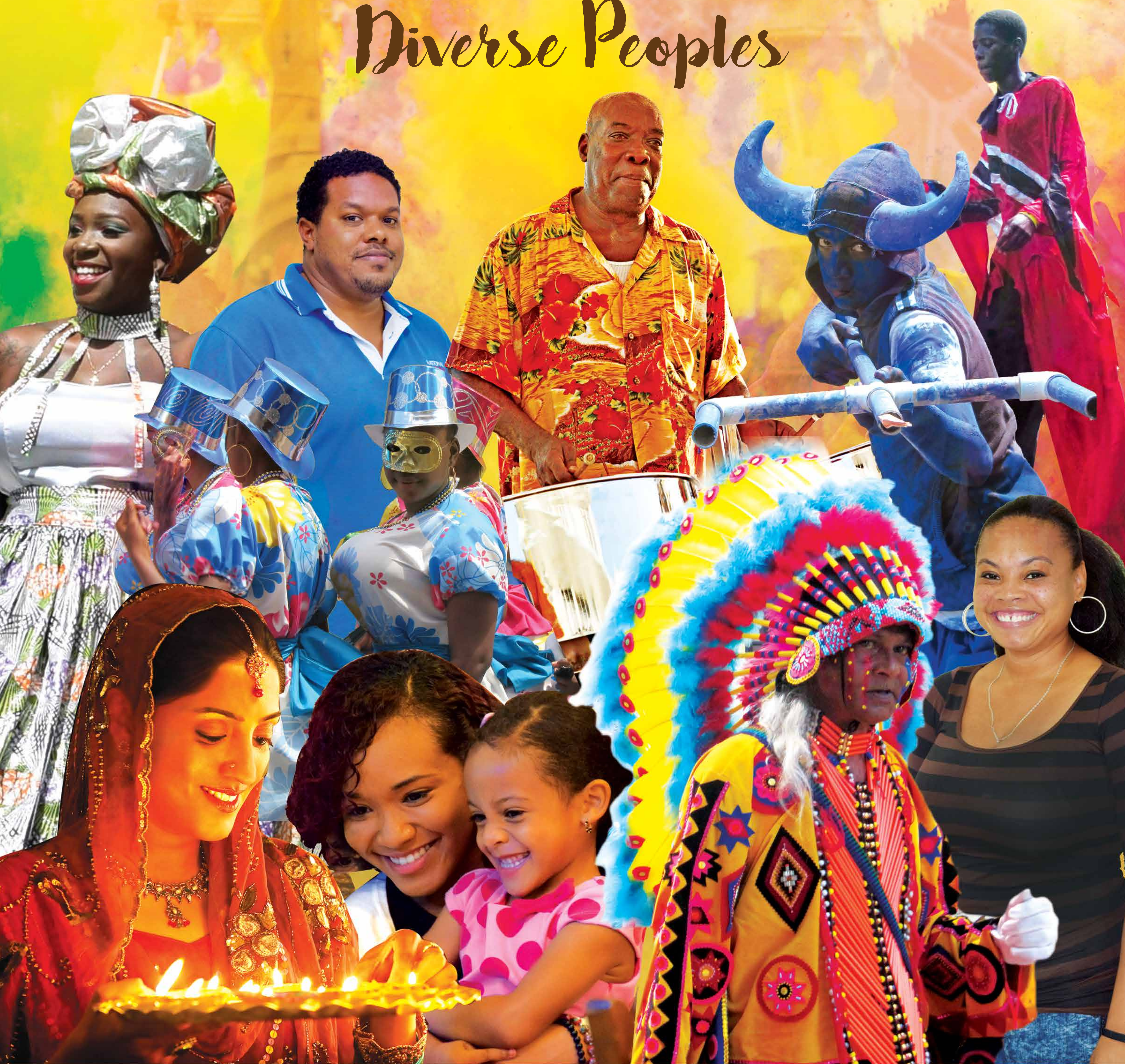


From around 1890, and continuing through the early 1900s, a few people began arriving in Trinidad from Syria and Lebanon in the Middle East. They were not indentured immigrants; they came to escape poverty and religious persecution at home (they were nearly all Christians and were not well treated by the Muslim government of the region). In Trinidad, most worked as peddlers, going around the island on foot selling cloth and other goods. Eventually, their children or grandchildren were able to open large stores and factories.



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One Nation Diverse Peoples



The British Colony of Trinidad and Tobago, with its population descended from so many different groups of immigrants, from Africa, Europe and Asia, as well as the descendants of the First Peoples, became an independent nation on August 31, 1962. It took up responsibility for its own affairs and joined the United Nations. In 1976, it became a Republic, cutting its ties with the British monarchy, while remaining a member of the Commonwealth (the association of former British colonies). As a small twin-island state, with one of the most diverse populations anywhere, Trinidad and Tobago can be an example to the world.

Written by Prof. Bridget Brereton

Photographs courtesy: Deborah Best, Jeffrey Wong Sang, Kara Roopsingh, Jesma MacFarlane, Glen Beadon, Jeanine Lee Kim, Roma Wong Sang.

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