

SIPARIA – (Sand City)

Part One

The Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (SIS) is a unit of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and was formed to actualize the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) in Trinidad and Tobago. An integral aspect of the SAFFL initiative among others, is to conduct research into local historic Spanish communities, under which grouping one can classify Siparia. After conducting research and publicising the findings through articles in the daily press, the SIS hopes that the public is made aware of the places, districts and communities in Trinidad and Tobago that are of Spanish heritage and areas where the Spanish heritage is still maintained to this day. This is in keeping with objective 2 of the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative which is to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the cultures which (have emerged) and are emerging in our society.

SIPARIA

Siparia is a town situated in the south-western region of Trinidad, south of Penal and west of Fyzabad. Siparia has developed from a relatively agricultural village into *una ciudad animada* (a busy city). Today, there are 8 schools (three of which are secondary schools), 4 banks, numerous churches, mosques, temples and several shopping centres. Consequently, it has been declared the administrative centre for the county of Saint Patrick and the seat of the Siparia Regional Corporation.

According to Theresa Noel, a researcher from Siparia, the name “Siparia” is actually not of Spanish origin but rather of Amerindian origin; it means “sandy place”, “sand city”, “place of sand”. She reiterates that it is believed that the name Siparia is reflective of the type of soil present in the community (which is of a sandy nature). According to www.triniview.com, the district of Siparia was established in 1758 by Capuchin monks from Aragon, Spain, who came to spread the Christian doctrine among not only the indigenous Amerindian population but also to those who travelled from the Orinoco River in South America. One may ask why Siparia? Apart from its close proximity to Venezuela, these Amerindian tribes saw Siparia as a meeting point where they would assemble before going to the San Fernando Hills to perform various religious rites. From the Spanish point of view, they would in turn use the site as an opportunity to evangelise the Amerindian tribes. An interesting point to note is that in 2006,

Siparia celebrated 250 years of Catholicism. This means that Catholicism has been the main religious presence in Siparia for 250 years.

Apart from the fact that Trinidad was under Spanish governance, the transit of Amerindians from the Orinoco and the influx of the neighbouring Venezuelans (during their War of Independence) have greatly influenced and helped to consolidate Siparia's Spanish heritage. The impact of these occurrences and the strong Spanish heritage has resulted in at least two distinct features of the district of Siparia: the phenomenon of **La Divina Pastora** and **parang**.

THE PHENOMENON OF LA DIVINA PASTORA.

Of noteworthy significance is the fact that "La Divina Pastora" is the Spanish equivalent of the phrase "the Divine Shepherdess" in reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Therefore, the celebration of *La Divina Pastora* is indeed the celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. However, in this case, the statue of *La Divina Pastora* differs from all the other statues of the Virgin Mary: it is short in stature with long black hair and copper-coloured skin.

With regard to the origin of the "La Divina Pastora", a parish record states that the statue was brought from Venezuela to Siparia by a Spanish priest. According to www.triniview.com, even before this, it is believed that in 1795, Pope Pius decreed that the saint known as "the Divine Shepherdess" was made the patron saint of all Capuchin missions. Hence, a Spanish priest brought a statue of the Catholic saint to the church in Siparia from Venezuela during the 19th Century (claiming that it saved his life).

The commemoration of the *La Divina Pastora* usually occurs during the Easter season (from Holy Thursday to Easter Monday) at the site of the La Divina Pastora R.C. Church in Siparia. The celebration tends to be a three-fold event: the mass, the street procession(s) and the "feast day". The celebration usually begins with a mass (commencing at ten o'clock) after which there is a procession through the streets with the statue of La Divina Pastora. During the procession, participants would pray the Rosary, sing Marian hymns and then pray the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Afterwards, participants return to the church where they would perform the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The end of this benediction would signal the end of the religious observances but the start of "la fiesta" (which usually occurs on a Sunday). On the feast day (as it is known), there would be several options available to provide entertainment: parang groups, steel bands or even the local police band. What is interesting to note, according to Theresa Noel is that "when the procession of La Divina Pastora is on the street, all the music emanating from the DJ trucks, is lowered. In some cases, the secular music is turned off and religious music is played instead."

These actions show that there is a clear understanding and deep respect for the presence of the *La Divina Pastora* statue.

One of the aspects of the *La Divina Pastora* celebration that makes it so extraordinary is the fact that Hindus, Muslims, Presbyterians and people of other religious persuasions pay homage to the Divine Shepherdess. Apart from Catholics, Hindus account for the largest cross-section of worshippers participating in the festival. Reasons supporting the multi-religious observances/participation are moot in nature. However, the most popular view posits that Hindus or rather certain sects of Hindus, pay homage to the La Divina Pastora statue (whom they refer to as *Siparee Mai* "Mother of Siparia") because they believe that the statue is really a reincarnation of one of the Hindu goddesses named Kali. Hindus usually flock the church premises on Holy Thursday where they would render worship to the saint and also make financial contributions in hope for her blessings. As Theresa Noel affirms, "there is a real kind of cordial relationship between the Hindus and Catholics" at this time." However, although there is mutual respect during the time of adoration of the La Divina Pastora, Hindus and other religious sects do not participate in the sacred part of the mass.

PARANG

Another aspect indicative of Siparia's Spanish heritage is the musical genre of **parang**. Parang is a musical art form that is an essential aspect of Trinidad and Tobago's Christmas celebrations. Some believe that the art form originated from Spain; others believe that it stemmed from Venezuela. Nevertheless, it is definitely a by-product of our Spanish heritage. Generally, parang music is rendered in Spanish, although there have been instances where artists have used the Spanish based rhythms coupled with English lyrics. Some of the main instruments used in parang are: the cuatro (a four stringed guitar), the violin, the maracas (commonly known as the chac chac), the one stringed box bass, the flute and the ever popular mandolin.

This art form originated in rural areas where there was once a strong Spanish presence (like Lopinot, San Rafael, Brazil and Siparia). It gradually became more widespread with events and competitions being staged nationwide. Since its evolution however, the custom of house-to-house visits/ performances within various communities has drastically or more so completely phased out.

When one considers Siparia and by extension parang, it would be remiss not to think of the Queen of Parang, **Daisy Voisin**. Without Señora Voisin, where would parang be? Alexandra Voisin or *Daisy* as she was best known, was indeed one of the best exponents of the parang art form in Trinidad and Tobago. Daisy, (born to a Venezuelan mother and a father of French origin) started singing from a very young age. Her talent eventually afforded her the opportunity to have

stints with the Siparia Chorale and the Morne Diablo Group. Subsequently, she started her own parang group which was named after the patron saint of the La Divina Pastora. As a group, they were responsible for popular renditions such as *Alegria*, *Sereno*, and *El Nacimiento de la Verdad*. For more than a decade, Daisy and the La Divina Pastora group continued to “hispan-ise” us (*Hispa-nic + hypnot-ise*) with their renditions. Before her death, she tried arduously to spread the genre of parang to the regional and international communities, making her a cultural ambassador. She even copped the National Parang Association’s highest award many times and received the National Humming Bird Silver from the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. On 7 August 1991, the nation of Trinidad and Tobago mourned the death of Daisy Voisin. She will indeed be greatly missed by her native Siparians and by extension the rest of Trinidad and Tobago. ¡Daisy, Mil gracias por todo! (Thanks for everything!) Though Trinidad has been independent of Spanish governance for more than two hundred years, the impact of Spanish occupation has indeed left an indelible mark on the formation of our culture as is evident in the district of Siparia and other previously listed districts. The SIS hopes that with the re-introduction of Spanish and the implementation of the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, there will be a greater appreciation for the language, the culture and a recognition of the benefits that can be derived from the implementation of the SAFFL initiative.

Look out for part 2 of our study on Siparia as we continue to unearth the local historic Spanish community of Trinidad and Tobago.

DIGA QUE SÍ AL ESPAÑOL EN TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO – Say yes to Spanish in Trinidad and Tobago.

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