

ABOUT MAN BETTA MAN, FISSION AND FUSION, AND CREOLE, CALYPSO AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Gilbert A. Sprauve

Dr. Gilbert Sprauve is a Dutch and English creole scholar and Professor of Modern Languages at the University of the Virgin Islands. He received his Ph.D. in linguistics from Princeton University.

Here and there, scattered over the thin topsoil of these mountaintops in the Caribbean Sea that we call the Virgin Islands is a thistly weed known to locals by the name "Man Betta Man."¹ Its name is a riddle to all, one that is mirrored in the sharp contrast between the limited land mass that geographically defines the Virgin Islands and the cultural complexity and diversity characteristic of the Islands' historical and current population.

A key to unravelling the Islands' rich cultural flux and variety is the perspective compounded of linguistic and sociological sciences. Thus the major cultural groupings are to a large extent subsumable under the rubric "sociolinguistic sectors." Approaching the society in this way provides a clear cultural perspective on the complex and creative ways the following sectors of the population interact, communicate and compete with each other in relatively peaceful and harmonious settings:

1. Crucians
2. St. Thomians/St. Johnians
3. British Virgin Islanders
4. French
5. Puerto Ricans
6. Kittitians/Nevisians
7. Antiguans
8. Dominicans/St. Lucians
9. Trinidadians
10. American Blacks
11. American Whites

12. Arabs
13. Indians
14. Haitians
15. Dominicans from the Dominican Republic

The sociolinguistic approach taken here is useful in understanding the forces that bind together the society of these islands, themselves microcosms at once of the ethnically mixed Greater West Indies and of the United States melting pot. The author admits to a predilection for an approach defined less by conflict among the various groups and more by the cultural wealth which attends diversity and which, to some extent, is the by-product of intense economic exploitation and adversity. He, moreover, fully recognizes the validity of a strictly sociological survey of the same community informed by surface conflictual indices, one that could effectively reduce the groupings to "Blacks," "Whites" and "Others" or "Natives," "Aliens" and "Others," consistent with antagonisms still present in our islands.

Cultural divisions also can be marked by conflict. This may be heard in the terms utilized for other-group identification in conflictual — and quasi conflictual, that is, festive — settings. These include "cha-cha" for Virgin Islands French folk, "garrot" for folk from the Eastern Caribbean islands and "tomian" for St. Thomians. "Crucian" for St. Croix natives and "tolian" for Tortolians carry no significant negative or conflictual charge. "Pappa" and "mamma" are used frequently to refer to Puerto Ricans in the Virgin Islands, as "johnny" is to refer to Arabs.

¹ ed. note: The words can also be a proverbial way of advising against excessive pride (or despair); there is always one man better, never a final best.

If preservation of the Islands' rich cultural variety is on our list of priorities, then all sociolinguistic instruments marshalled to serve that variety deserve our attention, from lyrics of our calypsos to folk stories told in West Indian Creole. For the survival and persistence of the consciousness that we call "Virgin Islands culture" is by no means a trivial historical matter. To understand the workings of the engine that drives this consciousness we must first glance back at the economic and political forces that came to bear on these islands during the past half century.

The most dramatic expansion ever in the Virgin Islands economy began in the late fifties and early sixties of the present century; it is still in progress today, much to the dismay of a wide cross-section of our populace. Some historians date the groundwork for this boom to the years of the Second World War. Almost overnight these islands came under intense pressures to be the showcase par excellence of unchecked capital development and exponential commercial expansion. (Weren't we, after all, an American territory operating in the free enterprise system? And weren't the islands unsurpassed in natural beauty, the ultimate commodity for wealthy and adventurous visitors and investors?) When we consider these pressures from the outside, combined with local leaders' self-consciousness about poverty and their naive vulnerability to grandiose schemes of wealth for all, then we can comprehend why suddenly the doors were thrown open and the forces of development unleashed.

This kind of accelerated development everywhere hinges on the availability of cheap labor. The Virgin Islands were no exception. But Virgin Islanders were also coming into their fuller rights as United States citizens/subjects; this meant that, although their wages did not enjoy full equity with those of United States citizens on the mainland, they were still a decent cut above those of our fellow West Indians on our neighboring islands. The ambitious Virgin Islander who felt hemmed in by inadequate wages at home routinely pulled stakes and travelled to "The Big City" — usually New York — to make his fortune. The ambitious West Indian, analogously stymied by low wages on his home island, was all too ready to fill the order when developers from the Virgin Islands — latter day raiders — arrived on their shores in pursuit of able-bodied laborers for Virgin Islands industry and construction.

Thus was set in motion a new version of the famous triangular trade, this one involving the United States, the Virgin Islands and other islands in the Caribbean. The Virgin Islands were the hub of this trade, rather than simply one corner, so the analogy with triangular patterns is perhaps imperfect. But in effect the three part trade worked as follows. From the brow of an underpaid labor force transported to and toiling in the Virgin Islands, substantial revenues in the form of greenbacks

would find their way back into the treasuries of the labor-producing islands. This hard earned U.S. currency now deposited in the treasuries of our neighboring islands in the Eastern Caribbean translated into a caring posture for the United States vis-à-vis this potentially turbulent region.

It must be tempting for the architects of Virgin Islands modern style development to congratulate themselves for the apparent success of their project and its far-flung ramifications for regional "stability." The truth of the matter is this economic success story is also a blueprint for cultural fission and disintegration. It fosters unfathomable levels of cynicism, divisiveness and distrust within the populace.

ENTER CREOLE, CALYPSO AND CARNIVAL!

One or another of the creoles (whether Dutch-English-French- or Spanish-associated) is recognized as the folk language on practically every island of the Eastern Caribbean and Virgin Islands. The grammar and the lexicological strategies of each creole generally differs in only minor ways from the others. Sociologically speaking, creoles throughout the region are despised and their use discouraged by educators and all custodians of "higher culture." Yet it would appear that the more resolute the program to eradicate a creole, the more persistent the language has grown as the instrument of folk expression.

Beyond its use in unguarded, informal conversation, Creole plays a very important ceremonial — and even communal — role throughout the Caribbean. It is the medium for lyrics of calypso, the West Indian musical phenomenon that at once energizes our *fêtes* with pulsating rhythms and seduces our intellect with potent political, social and historical commentary. Although Virgin Islanders, like other West Indians, are flexible enough linguistically to function reasonably well in standard varieties of English, all our calypsos are sung in Creole. The inaccessibility of this code to newcomers, to the press and to the cadre of largely imported or alienated managerial staff makes room for transient satire — and sometimes outright ridicule — of those who run things.

And herein lies one of the more gratuitous ironies of the Virgin Islands as the American Paradise. It is the transplanted Eastern Caribbean calypsonians, expanding the poetic energy of their own particular creole dialects, who have revitalized calypso in the Virgin Islands. Perhaps in response to the harsher socio-economic landscape of their homelands, they lend themselves heartily to expressing the underclass's frustrations and cynicism. They make their mark with lyrics that strike at the heart of the system's dual standards. Often the tourist does well to simply jump up in the

crowd and turn a deaf ear to lyrics that, in any case, would not only mystify him linguistically but assail him morally.

In this region, to discuss calypso is to evoke Carnival. Carnival is described as the season when everybody comes together as one. Families are reunited as members return home from hundreds and thousands of miles away. Carnival is advertised as two days of giant parades, pageantry in which the Islands' romanticists and realists compete for center stage — Main Street from one end of town to the other. Fantastic costumes abound; social parody is plentiful. And Carnival is the World Series of Calypso, replete with a junior series for the up and coming generation of Caribbean troubadours. Here they compete for the title of King or Queen of Calypso before appreciative but wise and discriminating audiences. Carnival is also the season when political aspirants traditionally announce their plans for upcoming elections. Carnival speaks volumes about social organization and cultural identity and political posturing in the Virgin Islands.

From the vantage point of our approach founded on "sociolinguistic sectors," the unity of Carnival can be seen to be mediated by several social realities. St. Thomians and St. Johnians accept Tortolians and British Virgin Islanders as kinfolk; regular commerce with the British Virgin Islands and waves of migrations from them have gone on uninterrupted since Europeans

settled these islands. On the other hand, when Crucians discuss their past and their cultural traditions they pay homage to ancestors, including relatively recent ones, whose place of birth was on one of the Eastern Caribbean islands such as Antigua, Barbados, Nevis or St. Kitts. Several mini carnivals or ethnic celebrations in our islands demonstrate this bidirectional orientation. British Virgin Islands/American Virgin Islands Day is primarily a St. Thomas and St. John fête, while Eastern Caribbean Day is celebrated on St. Croix. Dividing along similar lines, Fathers Day in St. Thomas — including boat races and a fishing tournament — toasts the contribution of the French settlers and their descendants; while on St. Croix, Puerto Rico/VI Friendship Day celebrates the presence of those who migrated from Vieques and Culebra to our shores.

A vigorous debate has been going on in the Virgin Islands about whether these festivals promote unity or disunity. But in each community the grand-daddy of the annual celebrations is clear: it is Carnival on St. Thomas and St. John, and Festival on St. Croix. All groups participate and compete in these events. Calypsonians flock to them from the Greater Caribbean to meet the challenge of feting and entertaining the Virgin Islands in all its cultural diversity. In this way, the fissures of rampant exploitation and its attendant cynicism are subjected to intense festive meltdown. And the culture prospers.

WERE THERE GIANTS?

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Yes, one!
WHO?
Tampo!
Sifting meticulously through recollections from his youth the writer was able to recall one man that enjoyed the status of "giant." "Enjoyed" is used rhetorically, for Tampo certainly did not solicit, much less abuse, any special dispensations that came with the distinction. He may in fact have been totally oblivious to them.

The writer next pondered the question of confirming the Tampo-the-Giant myth. Tracking down schoolmates would be simple enough. It is a small, close-knit community. Just mention "Tampo," and Jiggy, for one — our unofficial class historian — would recite the exact day when Miss Marcellus, after struggling with an

incredulous Kenny, who resolutely refused to swallow the meaning of the Lilliputian fairy tale for the better part of a class period, suddenly made him and the rest of the class understand by comparing Gulliver to... you know who!

But the writer decided on a different tactic. At the end of each interview done in preparation for the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, he would ask his interlocutor to tell him what he or she knew of Tampo.

Fred (a fisherman): De story 'bout Tampo??

Interviewer: ... ain' got a bank out dey, dey call Tampo?

F: Not me!

I: I hear some St. John man talkin' 'bout Tampo Bank.

F: You know who dey call Tampo?