

# Cultural differences between trinidad and tobago



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

You are a Tobagonian recently returned from your first trip to Trinidad where you spent two weeks. Record in your journal, the differences you have observed in the culture of the two islands. Based on your knowledge of the history of both islands, give explanations for those differences. In one entry you may also note any cultural similarities you observed.

Today marks one week since I have returned from the wonderful island of Trinidad, which is the sister island of my homeland, Tobago. The islands are located on the northern edge of South America on the north-eastern coast of Venezuela. I have always wanted to visit Trinidad, since I have heard countless stories about the great experiences my family had there. Fortunately, I finally had the chance to create memorable experiences of my own, during a two week stay at the multi-cultural island, Trinidad. My trip started from February 24<sup>th</sup> and ended on March 9<sup>th</sup>. I arrived at Trinidad at approximately two o'clock during the day on Monday, the place was furiously heated, and the sun was scorching my skin as I waited on my Aunt to pick me up from the Port. I remembered taking a deep breathe of polluted air, yes, polluted. Usually, in Tobago the air is clean, fresh and uncontaminated, on the other hand, in Trinidad; the air seemed to be comprised of filth and pounds of dust. Nevertheless, my Aunt picked me up at half past two, and that was when my journey to the exploration of the differences and similarities of the cultural attributes between Trinidad and Tobago had begun. As a result, the cultural experiences I observed or was exposed to in Trinidad, were the language used, the education system, the tradition of 'keeping ah wake', the celebration of Carnival and the diversity of religion.

On the very first day of visiting Trinidad, the first cultural difference I observed between Trinidad and Tobago was the language that was spoken. On the way to my Aunt's place, we stopped off to buy the most popular food in Trinidad, 'doubles'. As I sat in the passenger's seat, and waited for my aunt to buy the food, I observed the behaviour and language that the Trinidadians portrayed. Apparently, a man of the African descent has been waiting a long while for service from the doubles vendor, and this caused him to cuss out in an unpleasant manner. Also, I noticed his accent as well as the other buyers, had influences of the Indian, African, French and Spanish heritages (Chapter Five: Trinidad and Tobago – Intercontinental Book Centre, 2014). This was quite interesting to me because the dialect in Tobago comes mostly from the African heritage. Also, Patois which is a variety of Spanish and French was once widely spoken in Trinidad until the end of the 1800's, as a result; there are various traces of the language combined in the Trinidadian Creole English. Trinidadians and Tobagonians both speak Creole English; however, there is a difference with the use of grammar and pronunciation in which Trinidadians used (Language Facts About Trinidad and Tobago, 2014). In contrast, Tobagonian Creole English was derived from the French, Dutch and Courlander settlers (Trinidad and Tobago – Speaking the Language | ExpatFocus. com, 2014), but the Tobago's dialect is influenced predominantly by the Africans.

On the second day of my visit to Trinidad, I observed the first similarity between the two islands which is the education system. After having breakfast at my Aunt Lisa's place, we left to drop off her daughters, Sarah and Maria to their schools. On our way there, I noticed there were a lot of

schools in Trinidad, from Primary schools to Tertiary Institutes. Sarah attended a Primary school and she was in the seventh year, therefore, she would be writing her final exam soon, to gain entry into a Secondary school. On the other hand, Maria is in the fifth year of Secondary school, and she will also be sitting a final exam to gain access into a Tertiary institute. After dropping off the two girls to their schools, Lisa and I were talking about how thankful we are that Trinidad and Tobago has an education system that is free for all. Luckily, in the past, education opportunities started to expand from 1852, in the 1970's the secondary education system was established, vocational schools were opened and primary schools were fully integrated. Hence, the British system took charge of the education system of Trinidad and Tobago in the twentieth century, and now education is available to all elements of society (Trinidad and Tobago – EDUCATION, 2014).

The other similarity I observed between Trinidad and Tobago was experienced on the fourth day of my visit, which was the tradition of 'keeping ah wake'. I was able to experience this tradition, not only in Tobago which is my homeland, but in Trinidad as well, and the tradition of a 'wake' is quite the same in both countries. On Friday morning, Lisa was notified of a death of one of her neighbours, an eighty two year old woman who was very kind to her and her family. Later that day, Lisa and I got dressed to attend the 'wake' at the neighbour's home. Presently, a wake is the gathering of friends and relatives at the home of the deceased. We made a contribution of coffee and biscuits to the home, and other friends and relatives brought alcohol, tea and more coffee. As I got acquainted with the other neighbours that were present at the wake, I noticed a group of men were playing cards

and drinking alcohol and the ladies were drinking tea and chatting amongst themselves. I was informed that the funeral of the old woman was to be held on the Sunday; therefore, every night until Sunday, the deceased home will be 'holding a wake'. The word 'wake' originated from the Old English word 'wacu' which is related to the contemporary word 'watch'. After two hours during the wake, everyone gathered together to engage in prayer for the passing of the old woman. Originally, "the wake was a prayer vigil where family and friends would pray for the soul of the deceased" (Wilton, 2004). Therefore, this family was sticking with the true tradition of 'keeping ah wake'. Although, in the past, there was a misconception that people in many Celtic countries in Europe held a wake by placing the dead body on a table while relatives gathered around drinking alcohol and watched the dead body to see if it will wake up (Wilton, 2004). Nevertheless, in Trinidad and Tobago, 'holding a wake' is quite common when there is a death in a family. However, the association of prayer at a wake has become less significant, and it is more associated with social interactions. Fortunately, in Trinidad, I was able to witness the real tradition of 'keeping ah wake'.

On day eight, the second cultural difference between Trinidad and Tobago in which I experienced was the festival called Carnival. My family from Tobago always talked about their amazing experiences; however, my experience with Carnival at Trinidad was truly a disturbingly memorable one. Every year, my aunt and her family usually go to Port of Spain to look at the celebration, which comprises of colourful costumes, music, dance and public partying on the streets. We arrived at Port of Spain at approximately twelve o'clock during the day on Carnival Tuesday, the sun was incredibly hot and I felt like

my skin was almost blistering as I stood up to witness the display of the parade of the bands, with their multi-colour costumes on the masqueraders. In addition, they vulgarly danced along with the Soca music, which was a great annoyance to me. It was quite disturbing to see adults behave in such indecent and unacceptable behaviour in the presence of young children.

Aside from the negative feedback I have on Carnival, the only aspect I actually enjoyed were the sight of the unique and beautiful costumes. Originally, Carnival was established by the French settlers in the 1700's and was celebrated by the upper class people. As a result, the slaves of the island mimicked the celebrations of the French, and this was spread to all the freed slaves after the abolition of slavery. Therefore, they dressed with feathers and different costumes, and celebrated their freedom on the streets, hence, Carnival was established. In contrast, in Tobago, the island's traditions and history are embraced, while the celebration is associated with speech bands, whip wielding devils known as 'jab jabs' and African drumming (Trinidad and Tobago – The True Caribbean – Official Travel and Tourism Site, 2014). All in all, I disliked my experience with Carnival in Trinidad, since the celebration was not about tradition, but it was more associated with vulgarity, and disorderly behaviour.

Lastly, on the ninth day of my visit, I observed another cultural difference between Trinidad and Tobago, the diversity of religion. Trinidad is referred to as "a multi-cultural melting pot" (Trinidad and Tobago – The True Caribbean – Official Travel and Tourism Site, 2014). When I visited Trinidad, I had the opportunity to attend a Hindu prayers held by my relatives on the Wednesday after Carnival, in which Hindus gathered at a temple, to worship

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their Gods. I observed that women were dressed in beautifully sequenced Indian wear while the males dressed in plain white cotton cloth. The ceremony was held for two hours, and everyone clapped their hands while they sang and recite chants, and the musicians at the front were gracefully beating the drum called a 'tabla' together with the soft sound of the harmonium. Also, I observed that not only were Indians present in the temple, but people of the African descent as well. This particular Hindu ceremony was definitely interesting to me because in Tobago I was never able to attend any prayers other than Christian. Also, on that same day, on my way to the prayers, I noticed there were a lot of people attending Christian churches; this was due to the festivity called Lent.

Compared to Tobago, Trinidad is certainly more diverse in religion and culture, and this is mainly because of the historical upbringings and heritages. For instance, the Roman Catholics were the first religious group to arrive in Trinidad in 1498, Africans were brought to the island due to the slave trade in 1797, and in 1845 the indentured labourers consisting of mostly Hindus and Muslims were also brought to the island (Culture (Trinidad), 2014). Hence, there are still traces in the elements of the religions from the past, and represented in Trinidad. On the other hand, in Tobago, I don't usually see people of other religions, different from Christian, because Tobago's population remained predominantly of the African descent. Therefore, there is not diversity in religion in Tobago, as there is in Trinidad (Culture (Trinidad), 2014).

In conclusion, Trinidad and Tobago are two magnificent islands that share many similarities and differences in terms of cultures. Fortunately, I was able

to experience a few of the cultural attributes of Trinidad, during my two weeks stay. Thus, on the first day, I experienced/observed that the language used in Trinidad is slightly different to Tobago's language since the language in Trinidad is influenced by a larger variety of heritages than Tobago. In addition, on the second day I noticed a great similarity in the education system of both islands, since education is free for all from the primary level education onwards and the structure of the system is the same as well, due to the model of the British system. Also, on the fourth day I was able to experience the true tradition of a 'wake', which was originated by the Europeans. Alternatively, on the eighth day of my visit, I experienced the celebration of the famous Trinidad Carnival, which is more ostentatious, colourful, and indecent compared to Tobago, where the celebration is more traditional and laid back. Subsequently, on the ninth day, I realised that Trinidad is more diverse in terms of religion rather than Tobago due to the various heritages left behind in the past by immigrants. All in all, my experience of the visitation of Trinidad was quite memorable, and I am now aware of the cultural similarities and differences, along with its historical significance.

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