On December 1st, 1699 the Amerindians at the Mission of San Francisco de los Arenales rose up and killed their European slave masters, who happened to be Capuchin priests. They then went on to kill the Spanish Governor of the island (Trinidad). Tragically but inevitably, they were tracked down. A group was cornered by the Spanish at Point Galera. Here, rather than surrender, they jumped to their deaths off the cliffs of the “Iron Coast” - women, men and children.

Perhaps it is here that we may locate the basis of real unity. These Amerindians, whom we call “Caribs,” are the primordial tribe, the red ancestors of all “Trinbagonians.” They are the first children of our earth. Yet this possibility is conceived in an act of “original violence.” In this act of violence the Spanish were laying the foundation of that Eurocentric hegemony which we will call the modern world, a global social, political, economic, technological system.

The central encounter which defines what became the Caribbean mainstream was that between this Eurocentric hegemony and the African. The result of this encounter was a society conceived in slavery and born with emancipation - the creole. The dominant structure of the creole was that of the Eurocentric hegemony. However its earthed cultural vitality was that of the African. Hence the creole possessed a fundamentally ambiguous character. It represented both a space of entrenched hegemony as well as one of cultural affirmation and resistance. The creole also represented the dominant paradigm of “unity” in Trinidad and Tobago in the post-Emancipation period. We shall examine the case of Trinidad.

The creole structure represented a continuum, between the Eurocentric apex and the Afrocentric base within which were to be located a range of groupings and mixtures - “Spanish”, Syrians, Portuguese, light browns etc. However there was another continuum in the creole, that of centre and periphery. Hence, while Africans were oppressed in its mainstream, Indians were alienated at its margin. The ideology of “unity” was therefore one of assimilation. The creole was capable of incorporating diverse groupings and cultural elements, but in terms of its own framework. Those that refused to be assimilated, in particular the “East” Indians were peripheralized. The Indians came here in large numbers in the early post-Emancipation period under the system of indenture. They here constituted a distinct community. The presence of this distinct and strikingly different ethnic group represented an economic challenge to the African masses. Hence there was from the very beginning the inherent possibility of ethnic contestation and conflict. The European colonial masters took full advantage of this cleavage. Here the ideology of assimilation served the praxis of alienation. The refusal of this recalcitrant group to conform to the creole mainstream justified its systemic alienation. But the real aim of the Eurocentric hegemony was the suppression of any alien worldview, be it African or Indian.

In 1956 came the rise of full-blown nationalism and the movement towards independence. However nationalism rested on the same ideology of assimilation and praxis of alienation. National culture was creole culture. There were also here primordial fears of an Indian takeover. Indeed the entire democratic system with its African and Indian
political parties feeds off the mutual alienation of these two groups.

The Afro-Saxon élites who led the nationalist movement failed to make, or even initiate, an epistemological break with the dominant Eurocentric worldview. Indeed the very term “nationalism” in this context indicates that the ideology remains well within the parameters of that of the modern Western “nation-state” and its structurally all-defining bureaucracy. This inherently fascist structure remains an extension of the Eurocentric hegemony. It radically oppresses the ontological cultural vitality of the African and Indian “masses.” Hence nationalism with its mentally colonized leadership, while originally grounded in the African community fundamentally betrayed its own people. This betrayal had certain radical consequences for the creole system, consequences that did not surface until a generation after—in the course of the 1980s.

While the creole system with its inherent oppression of the African and alienation of the Indian had to collapse, the nationalist betrayal led to a certain type of collapse. This collapse has the characteristics of hegemonization and ethnicization. Firstly, the nationalist betrayal led to the fundamental dislocation of the African presence on the landscape and to the extension of Eurocentric hegemony in and over the entire society, this largely at the expense of the dislocated Afrocentric presence. Secondly, with the collapse the unresolved ethnic cleavages have surfaced. There is in this post-creole society a fundamental demarcation along ethnic lines. Hence there has been a fundamental shift in the way the society as a whole is to be understood. No longer is it to be seen as the creole structure which defines a range of groupings in terms of top, bottom and periphery. Instead what was once the creole “structure” is now “structures” which are being contested by distinct groups or spaces each defined around a phenomenologically distinct ethnic centre. It is these ethnic groups or spaces which constitute the new basis for understanding our society. Here four distinct ethnic centres may be identified—the “Indian” or Indo-Trinidadian, the “African” or Afro-Trinidadian, the Neo-European or Euro-Trinidadian and the Afrocentric Tobagonian.

The term “space” is employed alongside that of “group.” This indicates that these ethnic groups are by no means homogeneous. Rather these spaces define various groupings, persons, cultural elements and structures in the society. However, in the chaotic post-creole mainstream which is contemporary society in Trinidad and Tobago this defining by these groups or spaces is occurring in a mode of fundamental ethnic contestation. This mode of contestation renders problematic any attempted paradigm of unity meant to replace the discredited ideology of creole assimilationist nationalism. Let us briefly examine three such attempted paradigms.

There is the “rainbow people” ideology which is being articulated by the Neo-European ethnic group. This attempts to affirm unity in cultural diversity but does so in terms of the dominant Western framework which the Neo-European itself represents. Hence the “rainbow people” ideology does not address the real question of ethnic contestation and conflict as this would challenge its hegemony. Rather it is the purpose of this ideology to have the society avoid such questions. The window is really a mirror. The term “rainbow people” refers not to Trinidad and Tobago as a whole but to the Neo-Europeans themselves who are racially diverse and mixed but fundamentally Eurocentric in their ethnic centre. Then there is the “douglas” paradigm. While a “douglas poetic” as an ideal of African-Indian unity is ultimately viable the historical articulation of a “douglas space” remains extremely problematic in an arena defined by ethnic contestation. The question would have to be asked—what ethnic interest really controls this space? Hence from their position of alienation Indians viewed “douglasization,” in its biological and social dimensions, as a masked fascist attempt at assimilation by a hostile creole mainstream. This was indeed very often the case. Indeed such an ideology might still serve a racist Eurocentric agenda as a means of dealing with the “Indian question.”

However in more recent times, with the African presence in retreat and under siege, it has been the Afro-Trinidadians who have objected to “douglas” ideology. This, it would appear, is at the root of the controversy surrounding the Afrocentric objection to the calypso “Jahaji Bhai.” Here again the concerns are legitimate as it is the African presence which is now the most vulnerable. The final paradigm is the one favoured by the distinctively Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian ethnic leadership. It can perhaps best be termed that of a “tribal federation.” This ideology stresses the distinctiveness of each ethnic group and its need for its own space. But there is the affirmation that these groups can live in peace and unity. But the question remains—In what does this unity actually consist? Indeed, it is the failure of all these paradigms to articulate an understanding of “unity” which is historically viable given the present configuration of inherent ethnic contestation.

So, how ought one to proceed? First of all, the term “national” unity is inadequate. This leads back to the framework of “nationalism” which is essentially
defined by the modern Eurocentric hegemony established by the Spanish. Instead we need to turn to the Caribs. Our landscape compels the ethnic groups to engage and define each other. The creole revealed such engagement and, with all its flaws, pointed to the possibility of “unity.” The collapse of the creole means the collapse of post-Emancipation society. We are therefore in the midst of a most radical and fundamental shift. Here the normative mode of ethnic engagement is one of contestation. The challenge is how can this engagement, which the landscape itself compels, be rendered otherwise.

We here need to note that all four tribes consider themselves indigenous. This land is home for all of us. Hence these tribes are all descended from the primordial tribe - the Amerindians. The term “tribe” in this discourse is most significant. It points to the truth that these groups are defined by a radically “tribal” or “ethnic” structure, one which is rooted in the land and is therefore derived from the Amerindians. If all the tribes belong to the same earth and here engage and define each other then their constitutive dynamic is, in a fundamental sense, shared.

Hence the ethnic reality which constitutes our society ought not to be demonized as a necessary source of conflict. Rather the substance of this ethnicity itself provides the fundamental basis of unity and the dismantling of hegemony. Here the spirits of our Amerindian ancestors may finally come home as we all return to the promise of Point Galera.