The Golden Age and Decline of Matelot, Trinidad (1885-1945)

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Introduction

The history of the north coast, especially the North-Eastern Division, has always been the history of Toco, and thus the village of Matelot never had a separate voice. Matelot is located 46 miles from Port of Spain and the last village on the Paria Main Road (Figure 1). It has been an isolated village for most of its history, so much so that the terms Behind God’s Back and Down in the Hole were coined to describe the area. However, during the period 1885 to 1945, Matelot’s isolation was temporarily broken when cocoa became profitable, and attempts were made to “liberate” Matelot from Toco. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct a major period of Matelot’s past. A brief overview prior to 1889 will be discussed, followed by its rise and slow decline through the 1930s into the 1940s.

Figure 1: The location of Matelot and other villages in northeast Trinidad

Early Beginnings

The name Matelot first appears in 1791. Between this date and 1868, it was spelt many different ways including “Matelote” and “Matalotte.” The word we use today, “Matelot”
meaning “sailor,” is the official name given to us by the British in 1868 (The Catholic News 10 Aug. 1968, 1). The first known inhabitants of the area were the indigenous Carinepagoto, a Carib-speaking group. In 1760, the Franciscan Capuchin Fathers, who had established a mission at Toco, herded all of the indigenes along the north coast into a mission in Toco, fearing raids from French and Dutch interlopers (Besson and Brereton 1992, 2). Matelot became deserted. In 1783, as a result of the Cedula of Population, two Spanish families - the Estrada and Salvary - from Venezuela took up land in Matelot. The next mention of Matelot comes from Luciano de Giacomo, a Catholic priest, who observed that there were forty families living in Matelot, out of which only eight couples were married (de Giacomo Letter to Archbishop 28 Aug 1873). He had requested a piece of land from the Salvary family for construction of a chapel.

In 1818, Governor Ralph Woodford introduced the “Round the Island” steamer which called at Matelot; this transport system allowed the Spanish “Peons” to grow cocoa as a cash crop (Anthony 1988, 5). Cocoa began to do so well that in November 1885 Governor Sir William Robinson was allocating £200 for the construction of a building to hold a police court and school (CO 295/308 Robinson to Stanley 28 Nov. 1885). In September 1887, Father Bertrand Cothonay, on a visit to Matelot, noted that the village population was around 280 people, descended from the Estradas and Salvarys (Cothonay 2008, 106). As cocoa became prosperous, the village was invaded by immigrants from Grenada, Barbados, St. Vincent and Tobago, all hoping to get labouring jobs in the cocoa industry (The Catholic News 10 Aug. 1968, 1). Thus, by the start of 1889, Matelot was on the threshold of a new age.

Cocoa

Matelot based its economic development on cocoa, and this development would last until cocoa’s collapse in 1920. For nearly 100 years before 1890, both the Estradas and Salvarys dominated Matelot. Then they were joined by the Rondon, Noriega, and Sanchez families, immigrants from Venezuela, as well as immigrants from the smaller islands of Grenada, Barbados, St. Vincent and Tobago (Cadastral Sheet 5C 1957). By 1933, there were over 605 people living in Matelot, and the cocoa industry had grown to such an extent, that new cocoa areas had opened up in Petite Riviere, Lance Palmiste and Cachipa (Catholic Census 1933-36, 1). By 1920, the Barious, Gransaulls and Leong Chins had joined the Estradas and Salvarys as large cocoa landowners. These families owned estates that were between 100 and 300 acres, and they hired peasant farmers from around Matelot (Police Log Book 1904-34, 6-104).

The dominant system of cocoa production was the share-cropping method. Peasants grew cocoa on the proprietors’ land; at harvest time, half the cocoa was given to the proprietor and the peasants sold their half for cash (Singh 1994, 81). Many peasant farmers owned small parcels of land and earned extra money by working for the larger cocoa planters. They grew ground provisions, bananas and plantains among the cocoa trees. Several also raised chicken, ducks, cows and goats. Basic goods were obtained from the village shops owned by some cocoa proprietors, often on credit, and off the steamer at the depot. When peasants could not pay the debt, their land was taken as collateral. This was how estate owners like Joseph Bariou and Anthony Herbert amassed huge estates (Police Log Book 1904-34, 6-104).
Most estates in Matelot were located near five river sources: Petite Riviere and Matelot to the west and Marcel, Bacassa and Shark in the east (Cadastral Sheet 5C 1957). Many cocoa planters owned an estate house and a house in the village. This was important as planters needed to monitor the labourers, while storing and loading the cocoa onto the steamer (Police Log Book 1904-34, 61-74). A cocoa tree needed five years to mature and bear; then labourers would pick the ripe cocoa, crack the pods open and process the seeds into piles for sweating. Sweating consisted of placing cocoa beans in piles in the hot sun to ferment; during this fermentation process, the pulp juice (a sour vinery brown liquid) drained from the cocoa seed (Mann 1860, 8:786). Some larger estates used a cocoa house for the sweating process. After sweating, the beans were then spread out for several days to dry in the sun. The sweating process was always plagued with confusion as many planters were ignorant of the process, and accused labourers of stealing cocoa when really piles of cocoa were reduced in size and weight during the process of sweating (Police Log Book 1904-34, 64, 69, 80). After the sweating process, the beans were polished and placed in bags which workers then carried to the village to be stored at the proprietor’s home before being taken to the steamer for transport to Port of Spain.

The cocoa industry in Matelot faced no serious problems outside the occasional praedial larceny and bush fire caused by a hot dry season. There were few disturbances over cocoa, apart from the 1909 protest on Alice Leong Chin’s estate. The reason for the protest was never ascertained but all the cocoa was destroyed, and 17 people were charged with disturbing the peace (Police Log Book 1904-34, 8). The prosperity of Matelot began to wane after 1920 when cocoa prices collapsed and many cocoa farmers became bankrupt. The decline was so pronounced that people living in the adjacent settlements of Petite Riviere, Lance Palmiste and Cachipa began packing and moving to Matelot.

**Colonial Government**

Prior to the success of cocoa, the colonial government took no interest in Matelot. Community complaints, especially about the poor state of the roads, were referred to the parish priest. There was no infrastructure or social services. However, around 1885, the colonial government, realizing the importance of Matelot, began contributing to its development.

In 1885, Sir William Robinson provided funds for the construction of a building to house a police station and school, but the first successful assistance was given to building the Matelot Boys’ and Girls’ Roman Catholic School, which was completed in 1890. The school became an assisted school in 1900; by 1932, the grant provided was around £280.8.1½ (Blue Book 1901-1902, U7, 1932, U7). The government appointed the Manager and teachers after approval from the church.

In 1890, a new bridle road was constructed from Toco to Matelot but it was still plagued with landslides and became muddy when rain fell. During the 1880s, approval was given to have the road repaired annually at a cost of £2.1.8, and a similar grant of £16.13.9½ was provided for the upkeep of the steamer depot. However, complaints about the state of roads continued long after (Blue Book 1896, J15, 1919, J35). The Royal Steamer Packet Company, which had organized a “round the island” service, was regularly visiting Matelot by 1903. There were two steamers that stopped at Matelot - the
Kennet and Belize. Prices for travel ranged from $3.60 for first class to $1.20 for deck (Franklin 1903, 67).

There was no police service for Matelot until 1890, and it was only introduced due to pressure from cocoa planters, who had been suffering from praedial larceny. In 1896, a parcel of land was bought for $250, a building was raised, and the station was opened in 1903 (Blue Book 1896, J19, Franklin 1903, 67). It was located on Andrew Street, overlooking the village. Another reason for this move was the long process involved when complainants had to travel outside Matelot; therefore a police court was also opened which met every 17th of March, June, September and December (Franklin 1903, 67). Most cases related to cocoa; therefore police officers eventually became experts at solving cocoa problems.

In 1903, a Post Office was opened and mail was brought via steamer from Port of Spain. The Kennet brought the mail, which had to be picked up by 4:00 pm (Franklin 1903, 67). There were no health facilities in Matelot, and people depended upon herbal cures administered by elders. In 1907, a Dispensary was set up and a doctor visited once a week. He dealt with cases including fevers, yaws, poisoning and worms (Franklin 1907, 259). All these improvements crashed along with cocoa after 1920, and most of the infrastructure and services were not maintained.

Roman Catholic Church

Matelot was seen as part of the Catholic parish of Toco so Matelot residents, who were predominantly Roman Catholic, had to travel to Toco to get married, baptize their children and organize burials. Many found it difficult to make the long journey, and couples therefore preferred to, as the priest would call it, “live in sin”. All this changed in 1889 when the Catholic Archbishop appointed Father Hyacinth Bariou to the Toco/Matelot Parish (Death, Baptismal, First Communion . . . 1889-1941, 138). Bariou would, until his death in January 1926, minister directly to the spiritual needs of the village as well as rebuild its chapel.

Father Bariou’s first official act in 1889 was to start a new, separate birth/death/marriage register for Matelot. His next project was to build a school for Matelot children, rebuild the chapel and add a presbytery. Bariou would make weekly trips to Matelot from Toco, administering to all the villages along the way. By 1892, the Church of the Immaculate Conception was completed. It could accommodate 200 people and had an organ and choir (Blue Book 1894, T3). The villagers contributed to its upkeep by donating some of their crops to the Church.

In 1905, Bariou was hurt in an accident on his way to Matelot and retired from the parish (Retout 1992, 19). A new parish priest, Father Marino Troncoso, was appointed but did not stay long. Father Bariou continued to visit and work with villagers along the north coast; he stayed with his nephew Joseph Bariou. Villagers would bring him their problems and he would dispense advice (Troncoso Letter to Archbishop 12 Jan 1913). By 1920, he was reappointed and began work furnishing the presbytery. The Bariou family was heavily involved with the church. They donated land for a cemetery in Matelot, and the church loaned the Bariou family land to develop (Troncoso Letter to Archbishop 11 Nov 1912). By 1925, Bariou was writing to the Archbishop that there was a need to expand the Catholic mission to new areas like Petite Riviere where there were many Catholics. In April 1925, he began to repair the Bell tower but died before he could
finish it (Bariou Letter to Archbishop 4 April 1925). For his dedication to Matelot and the north coast, he was given the title “Apostle of the North Coast” (The Catholic News 10 August 1968). After his death, Matelot once more reverted to the Parish of Toco.

Education

There was no formal educational system in Matelot before 1890; however there is evidence that some estate owners had their workers instructed in the Catholic catechism. Most people spoke Spanish, French or patois, and few spoke English. In 1889, Father Bariou, with the aid of the colonial government, started construction on the first Boys’ and Girls’ Catholic Primary School, and in 1890 he commenced with an enrolment of 32 boys and 23 girls. Students had to pay an annual fee of £6.17.5 (Blue Book 1890, J19).

In 1901, the school was run solely on church and government contributions, and the enrollment had reached 38 boys and 33 girls (Blue Book 1901, J19). The subjects taught at the school included the three r’s (reading, writing and arithmetic) as well as geography, history, music and physical education. There was a special emphasis on handwork (woodwork, crafts and needlework) since students had to be industrious (Principal’s Daily Register, 23-26). All teachers had to be Catholic but were paid by the government and a Head Teacher ran the school. Children were instructed by a Pupil Teacher who was instructed by a senior teacher. As cocoa expanded, and new communities grew up, there was a need for more schools. In 1912, Father Troncoso requested that a school be built in the villages of Petite Riviere and Paria (Troncoso Letter to Archbishop 23 June 1912). Between 1914 and 1915, the school was rebuilt by Dom Bertron De Haesse, and unlike the original, it was separated from the church (de Haesse Letter to Archbishop 23 December 1915).

The first Head Teacher was Albert John Baptiste, who was appointed by Bariou in 1913 (Baptiste Letter to Archbishop 18 January 1913). Bariou was a lenient manager, he never stressed academic performance; instead he focused on the quality of hard work. He believed that focusing on both hard work and discipline would encourage parents to send their children to school. Bariou recorded that an Anglican school was started in 1923; however, it could not compete with the Catholic Church, and in September of that year it was closed (Bariou Letter to Archbishop 22 September 1923).

Attendance was always a problem at the school, especially between the years 1937 and 1940. Children came from far distances, usually by foot, and when it rained the school was virtually empty (Principal’s Daily Register, 65). Outbreaks of contagious diseases, including fever, mumps and ringworm, would result in the closure of the school. Other occasions for poor attendance included, harvests, festivals and the feasts of St. Peter and Paul (Principal’s Daily Register, 31). Teachers, too, were often absent. Many lived far from the school, and as all transactions had to be done in Port of Spain, teachers were making constant requests for time off.

The Inspector of Schools visited the school annually. He would take attendance of teachers and students, check both the internal and external structures of the school, and administer an examination (Principal’s Daily Register, 23-26). One recurring complaint made by the Inspector was that the school was too small, and the furniture was in a poor state. In the 1930s, a garden was added, and agriculture was introduced as a subject. In 1941, a recommendation for the rebuilding of the eastern portion of the school was carried out. Students supplied the labour; they carried all the stones, gravel and sand. In
October 1939, students were again used in the reconstruction of the presbytery (Principal’s Daily Register, 73). There were a few children who did not attend school in Matelot. Some cocoa planters sent their children to school in Port of Spain; and in the case of the Bariou family, all their children were sent to France to complete their studies in the early years of the century (Troncoso Letter to Archbishop 23 June 1912).

Even though cocoa was in decline by 1943, the Matelot school remained the centre of village life. In fact, many villagers depended on whoever managed the school to find them jobs connected to it.

**Decline**

The sudden drop in price of cocoa, from $23.90 per fanega (110lbs) to $9.50 in 1920, spelled ruin for Matelot planters (Singh 1994, 82). However, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Matelot planters experimented with growing nutmeg, tonka bean, coffee and citrus (Leo Lendor Interview 8 May 1998). Nutmeg was popular since it was used in food and confectioneries, while tonka bean was used as a flavouring agent. Yet most peasants suffered hardship due to loss of jobs or low wages.

Villagers now focused on full-scale production of provisions. They cleared illegally, or were given permission to use private land. Some obtained land from government in the 1930s for which they paid rent. Cassava was the most common crop but tannia, cush-cush (fine-yam), dasheen, and guinea yam were also grown (Herskovits and Herskovits 1976: 61-65). Some villagers also grew bananas, pumpkin, cucumbers and christophene. To supplement their income and diet, many turned to fishing. Most fishermen owned their own boats called “dugouts,” and used the banking and trolling method to catch fish. Fish caught included kingfish and carite (Herskovits and Herskovits 1976: 69-71). Transportation was always bad, and fishermen had to organize with local salesmen to carry their catches to Port of Spain. Hunting was also used to supplement their diet; with the use of dogs, hunters would catch game like tattoo, deer, agouti and possum.

But the economy of Matelot did not recover, and villagers continued to suffer; for example, malnutrition was rampant due to poor diet, and there was an increase in yaws cases (*Frambesia tropica*), between 1921 and 1931. Cocoa planters, who borrowed money to buy land, could not pay the mortgages; therefore, banks foreclosed on them. Many labourers were retrenched since there was no money to pay wages. Some people got work with the Public Work Department but many became literal “paupers.” A poor allowance of 24¢ per month was offered in 1939 to villagers; 16 people from Matelot received this relief (Herskovits and Herskovits 1976: 78). Pensions were also offered. In Matelot, 18 received $3.00, one received $2.95 and one got $1.50 per month.

**Conclusion**

We must give both cocoa production and the Catholic Church some praise for bringing development to Matelot, and placing it on the map during the period 1890-1920. Even so, the history of Matelot is one of constant struggle to improve living conditions, especially in the area of transportation and communication. The roads were bad and needed constant repair, and even when they were fixed and the steamer service was introduced,
these did not last long; for cocoa, which brought about change, declined and took the village down with it. But cocoa was not the only important influence in Matelot’s history; much of its development revolved around the Roman Catholic Church. The Church took an interest in the well-being of the people and also in their daily lives (economic, social and political). Sadly this was all embodied in one man, Father Bariou, who had a sustained interest in Matelot. When Father Bariou died, the church lost interest and the village reverted to being administered from Toco. Matelot once again became isolated.

References Cited


