The practice of bestowing names on places as a mark of identification is a time-honoured one which appears in all societies, including primitive ones. It is only natural, in any given society, for such names normally to derive from the language of the speech community concerned. Because of this inescapable link between toponyms and language, place-names can provide interesting insights into linguistic history — and indeed into other aspects of history — and their study is particularly valuable for early periods when more common methods of historical investigation may be inapplicable. Patterns of migration, settlement and colonization may, for example, be reflected in toponyms; and a close study of a map of Trinidad provides useful and interesting clues to the island’s demographic history as evidenced in the varied place-names left behind by the different linguistic groups who, over the centuries, have come to compose this traditionally polyglot, multiracial society. However, the complex demographic history of the island has introduced complicating factors, for the coexistence of different languages in the island as well as the superimposition of one language over another (or others) has at times obscured the true origins of a particular toponym. And just as today much of Trinidad’s population is a blend of various ethnic groups, so too its toponyms not only reflect varied linguistic traditions but at times represent curious mergers of these traditions.

Trinidad is, by any standard, a particularly fertile field of study as far as place-names are concerned. A quick glance at a map reveals the diversity of the linguistic provenance of toponyms such as:

1 Guanapo, Cumana, Arouca, Caura (Amerindian-Carib and Arawak)
2 Diego Martin, San Fernando, La Brea (Spanish)
3 Ste. Madeleine, Sans Souci, Pointe-a-Pierre (French)
4 Mandingo, Sierra Leone (African)
5 Fyzabad, Nepal, Barrackpore (East Indian)
6 Freeport, Fullerton (English)

Because the last three groups present little or no difficulty and are easily recognizable for what they are, this paper will be restricted to a consideration of the first three, which present unexpected problems.
Discovered in 1498 by Columbus on his Third Voyage, Trinidad was a Spanish possession until 1797 when it passed into British hands, and it remained British until Independence was granted to it in 1962. But these scant historical facts concerning the island’s history tell us little of its demographic and linguistic diversity. In the West Indian islands, for example Barbados and Antigua, the mere fact of colonization by a metropolitan power and the subsequent implantation of the relevant colonial languages frequently led to the almost complete obliteration of all toponyms of other linguistic provenance by those of the superstrate language. But this did not happen in a generalized way in Trinidad where colonial history provides us with the merest hint of the exceedingly complex overall picture. What seems strange at first glance is that, despite the fact that the island ceased to be a Spanish possession over 150 years ago, that during most of the modern period the official language of the island has been English, and that the island never was a French colony, there still remains in modern Trinidad such a plethora of Amerindian, Spanish and French toponyms which generally date to Pre-British days. This is an unusual situation, given the more generalized tendency in the English-speaking Caribbean for English toponyms to predominate, and more especially, for aboriginal names to disappear. It is true that in most of the islands certain isolated place-names from substrate languages have managed to survive, but in the case of Trinidad such survivals, especially those of Amerindian provenance, are disproportionately high.

The retention of Amerindian names appears to be ascribable, at least in part, to the nature of colonization and the extent of settlement in the island during the pre-nineteenth century period. The Spaniards arrived in Trinidad to find it peopled by tribes of different linguistic stocks — Arawakan and Cariban. Starting with Columbus, the Spaniards proceeded to replace indigenus toponyms with Spanish ones, a procedure characteristic of colonial regimes. According to tradition, Columbus had dedicated his Third Voyage to the Holy Trinity, a dedication which must have assumed the proportions of prophetic foresight when the first land he saw happened coincidentally to be a group of three hills in the south-eastern part of the newly discovered island which he called La Trinidad. This new Spanish-derived name thus replaced the Arawakans Kaeri, a name which, unfortunately, has nothing to do with the picturesque translation which has been popularly accorded it "Land of the Humming-bird", since it