

# Cultural Pelau

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Students at Caribbean Nazarene Theological College in Trinidad come together once a year for an event called "Cultural Pelau." Pelau is the name of a rice dish prepared with varying amounts of many different ingredients. Some pelau has chicken and rice; other dishes have beef and rice. Pelau may include pigeon peas or black beans. Some cooks include carrots and other colorful vegetables. While some students prefer their pelau moist and sticky, others prefer their pelau dry and fluffy. The students themselves are representative of the concept of pelau.

During the cultural pelau, students present their diverse cultures to the campus community by sharing artifacts, stories and songs from home. They serve a sampling of foods that represents their cultures: calaloo and doubles from Trinidad, roti and oiled down from Guyana, souse and jug-jug from Barbados, ackee and "stamp and go" from Jamaica, brownies and chocolate chip cookies from the United States, and other delicious dishes from the various countries represented each year. The students sing choruses and songs in new rhythms and dialects that call for intense concentration from the listener in order to catch the meanings. They wear costumes and cultural dress representing a pelau of island nations and Caribbean countries.

The students declare their own homeland as the true Caribbean paradise with its secluded bays, coral reefs for snorkeling and scuba diving, powder-white or dramatically black beaches lined with graceful coconut palms, and crystal clear, turquoise water for bathing. From the audience, the words ring out *yuh nable string bury dere*—the expression used when someone shows a highly unusual attachment to a certain place. (A saying arising from the cultural practice of burying the umbilical cord under a fruit-

laden mango tree, to ensure the child's eventual fruitfulness). At the end of each event, students declare that this cultural pelau was the best lime (pre-arranged pleasure activity) yet.

A first time visitor to the College soon learns that the Caribbean Region of the Church of the Nazarene includes more than just the islands stretching 3,500 miles from the Bahamas in the Atlantic to the most southern island nation of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The Caribbean Region also stretches westward over to the countries along the coast of South America: Belize, Suriname, and Guyana.

Students at Caribbean Nazarene Theological College have come from various nations across the Caribbean and other countries, including Africa, Canada, and the United States. Each year the enrollment shows the cultural differences in students. The first semester of 2002-2003 illustrates the diversity of the cultural pelau with students enrolled from Antigua (7%), Barbados (5%), Belize (2%), Dominica (1%), Guyana (7%), St. Lucia (1%), St. Vincent (1%), Suriname (2%), Trinidad and Tobago (69%), and the United States (5%). While there is great diversity, the Academic Dean announces every year that there are no foreign students at CNTC. Some students may be foreign to the government of Trinidad, and they may need student permits to enter the country, but at CNTC, there is one community.

To know the students of CNTC is to taste the pelau of the Caribbean and share an English that is something new in the world of languages. Although CNTC serves the English speaking peoples of the region, some of the French, Dutch, and Spanish speaking nations come under its educational arm. The official language on campus may be English, but after hearing the various dialects, visitors declare that another language is being spoken. The island vernacular, African dialects, Dutch, Indonesian and Indian, French and Spanish are present either as languages or as an influence on the English language. Rolando Quiroz from Belize teaches his native language Spanish and Joel Siwipersad from

Suriname teaches his native language Dutch to those in the missiology class and to other interested students. CNTC students participating in their multi-cultural practicum do not need to leave their educational region to find diversity.

Until the 15th century, the Crib and the Arawak Indians had the entire West Indies all to themselves. Then European nations began to colonize the West Indies, bringing their culture, language, and social influences to the islands and stayed until the late 19th to the late 20th century. In some cases, the islands have changed hands between nations several times. French, Dutch, Spanish, American, British, Danes, Portuguese, Indians, Lebanese, and Chinese—all mixed and mingled with the Africans who form the bulk of the West Indian population. The island where CNTC is located is predominantly East Indian 40.3% (a local term—primarily immigrants from northern India), black 39.5%, and mixed ethnic groups 18.4%, white 0.6%, Chinese and other 1.2%. The wide variety of religions show the influence of these groups: Roman Catholic 29.4%, Hindu 23.8%, Anglican 10.9%, Muslim 5.8%, Presbyterian 3.4%, other 26.7%. [www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/td.html](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/td.html)

Trinidad itself is a unique place with its own cultural pelau. It has spawned such wonders as the steelband, limbo, and calypso. Monkeys, water and tree boas, anacondas, manatees, parrots, and toucans live in its diverse terrain. Students feel justified to tell the stories of snakes found on campus, and in the telling, the snake grows longer and more dangerous. After four years, students have learned to clap on the off beat with the rhythm of neighboring nations, sit through two and three-hour long worship services, and adjust to spicy food, spicier music, and the gentle, leisurely lifestyle in the small village of Cantaro near the rain forest, far away from banks, malls, and restaurants.

CNTC is fifty-one years old. Its students attend the accredited university level college because they want quality education in a Christian environment. Students enrol in a pelau of programmes: theology, Christian education, management of human resources, psychology and counselling,

missiology, and music ministries. They take classes in modules, online, and in the traditional classroom. They become alumni who minister as pastors, evangelists, public school teachers, university professors, professional counsellors, administrators, district superintendents, business owners, and a pelau of other careers.

Getting to know one another better during the cultural pelau does not erase all relationship problems at CNTC, nor does a common race, religion, language, or culture insure friendships. Students learn to get along with people who are different and who will no doubt remain different. CNTC faculty and administrators encourage students to learn to look for common ground and search for ways in which differences can be resolved or adjusted in order to bring about new and stimulating relationships. The students learn that differences in culture may be like the differences in the preparation and the ingredients of pelau—both may just bring new excitement and a new enjoyment to living.

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