Agouti to Zandoli: Fauna in the Dictionary of Trinbagonian

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Monkey doh make road for gouti to run.
Zandoli, find yuh hole.

Such well known proverbs reflect the importance that animals have in the traditional folklore of Trinidad and Tobago. **Gouti,** or **agouti,** is a name given to the large rodent *Dasyprocta leporina* by the Arawaks, Caribs, Guarani and other Amerindian groups who inhabited the islands and mainland long before the arrival of Europeans. **Zandoli** is a French Creole ("Patois") name given to the ground lizard *Ameiva ameiva atrigularis* from the French **les anolis** 'lizards' by the Patois-speaking slaves who came to Trinidad from Haiti, Martinique and other Caribbean islands after the Spanish cedula of 1783.

The history of the naming of Trinidad and Tobago's fauna reflects the rich and varied linguistic heritage of the English and English Creole vernacular of the country. As part of a larger project, a scholarly and historical *Dictionary of Trinbagonian,* the flora and fauna are not being neglected. All known vernacular names for the plants and animals indigenous to the two islands will be listed. Also included will be historical quotations, accurate descriptions of the plants and animals, and, as far as possible, identification of etymological sources for the words. The following discussion is a bit of the lexicographer's log, a dictionary maker in the jungle of words, stuck in the confusion of underbrush, occasionally finding a trail.

Where can we look for good sources of quotations? The most logical is the writings of naturalists. Early issues of the *Journal of the Field Naturalists' Club* document the tireless efforts of well known local naturalists such as P. Lechmere Guppy, Richard Richardson Mole and Frederick (Fritz) W. Urich, who found and described many species, sending off specimens to the British Museum. They described not only animals and plants, but the hardships and pleasures of field trips:

"There were the quenk signs; there they had been drinking; there were their hoof marks; there they had been scratching their muddy backs against the trees . . . We have been imperceptibly increasing our pace and now we are rushing through the woods at headlong speed . . . tearing through the razor grass with hands held high to shield my face; now leaping down a steep bank, next stumbling against a half buried root . . . Never was there so steep a hill, never were the lianes thicker, never were there so many importunate thorns . . . What a sight! . . . In a hollow, over which grows a Bois Mulatre, with his hind quarters against its roots, with fiercely bristling grey and black hair, flashing black eyes and gleaming white teeth stands our game—at bay!" (Mole, 1895: 158-9.)

One of the most renowned early local naturalists was Louis A.A. De Verteuil, whose *Trinidad: Its Geography, Natural Resources, Administration, Present Condition, and Prospects* of 1858 (revised in 1884) combines lists of flora and fauna with extensive comments:

"The lape . . . seems to prefer the high woods in the vicinity of plantations . . . when pressed by the dogs the lape resorts to [its] stronghold [by a river], and, in extremity, to the water itself . . . it may be regarded as one of the richest and most delicate dishes in the shape of game."

Other writers, many of them visitors, wrote down whatever struck them as curious:

"The faulty idea that the lapa is amphibious is widespread amongst the negroes and peones. In this connection it is interesting to note that the Roman Catholic Creoles of Trinidad are permitted to eat the flesh of lapa on their fast days, when otherwise they would be restricted to fish." (Gordon, 1931: 723)

Not all sources are equally reliable, however. Ivan T. Sanderson, for example, in his 1939 *Caribbean Treasure,* describes finding a "luminous lizard", identified as *Proctoporus shrevei,* whose "sides lit up for a few seconds like the portholes on a ship". Complaining that "nobody would have believed me if I had announced that I had found a luminous reptile" he accuses zoologists of being "hide-bound". Scientists have still not found any evidence of what would be a unique occurrence. (In all fairness, they have not disproved it either.)

Memoirs often provide vivid descriptions of animal behaviour, as in this excerpt from Mrs. Carmichael's *Manners and Customs of the West Indies* (1833: 58-59):

"Before almost I was conscious of touching an orange, I was covered from head to foot with chasseur ants *[Eciton (Acamatus)* sp.]. There was but one remedy: Mrs. Warner called one of the men servants, who tore hastily some switches from the brushwood; and I was obliged to submit to rather a rough scourging. I was shockingly stung, and moreover, many of the insects continued their assaults all the way home. The ant is black, and about the fourth of an inch long."

The popular press, including newspapers and novels, provides valuable citations; the very fact that words are used there indicates that they are well known to the general public. Early newspaper reports often contain folklore about dangerous animals:

"On the subject of scorpion bites, the Wise Woman has spoken thus: When you have been bitten, drink some 'blue' water. That will keep you from dying and will enable you ever

afterwards to see a scorpion before it sees you. Then you can mash it. (*Trinidad Guardian,* 19 March 1921). (The 'blue water' here is ordinary laundry bluing.)"

Even in earlier times, people were moved to notice and deplore the destruction of faunal populations:

"Since two weeks past there is a migration of the Page butterflies [actually a day-flying moth, *Urania leilus*]. The boys call them whitetails. They fly Northwesterly with an Easterly bent. Boys with net and coconut branches . . . and small sticks are seen in every quarter in . . . Woodbrook . . . trying to catch, maim or destroy these beautiful things . . . Yesterday I saw a little fellow running after one – not a Page and he told me it was a Biscuit. I had not heard that name for a very long time." (Evening Star, 23 Sept. 1926).

Samuel Selvon's *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972) is the only Trinidad and Tobago novel found so far which is named after a fish. However, few fish anywhere have the cultural and emotional importance of the cascadoo, the armoured catfish *Hoplosternum littorale:*

"Dummy pulled at Sarojini and gestured to the net and the river.

'Go with Dummy and catch fish. It will give you something to do. You know what they say about the cascadoo. If you eat it you bound to dead in Trinidad.'

. . . Sarojini sat up straight and stared directly in front of her, as if at some invisible presence, and intoned: '"Those who eat the cascadura will, the native legend says, wheresoever they may wander end in Trinidad their days."'

. . . Sarojini was not dismayed . . . 'Garry could go and roam the whole wide world, but he got to come back once he eat that fish." (Selvon, 1972: 163)

One novel, Shiva Naipaul's *The Chip-Chip Gatherers* (1973) and at least one calypso have been written about *Donax denticulatus,* a small bivalve mollusc found in the sands of the eastern coast:

" Now chip-chip is a thing inside a shell . . .
In talkaree it's wonderful,
But the water that it spring is powerful."

(The last line refers to the reputed quality of chip-chip water for being "good for your back", i.e. virility. (A source for this lyric would be appreciated.)

Many authors use familiar birds to set a scene and mood:

"Bluejeans and keskidees, pickoplat and humming bird, semp and cravat, seven-colour parakeets, doves and wood pigeons . . . There was not a variety of birdlife not whirring and flashing in the trees." (Selvon, 1972: 54-55).

Others describe the traditional activities of children, such as collecting butterflies:

"I had left my large poison bottle under the leaves of a tough mountain lily growing higher up the rock where it held a little earth, and now I fetched it down (it contained a coffee, a lady slipper and two donkey eyes)." (McDonald, 1969: 3).

The work of the lexicographer is much like that of a detective – searching for clues, sifting evidence, trying to determine which "witness" is closest to the truth. The identification and matching of animals and their names is strewn with unsuspected pitfalls. If one is not a professional biologist, it can come as a shock to find that the one fixed reference point you thought was safe, i.e., Latin scientific names, can be shifting ground. An example is Trinidad's one known contribution to international English fauna vocabulary – **guppy.**

In 1866 the fish was named *Girardinus guppii* by A. Günther of the British Museum, in honour of the collector who had sent him specimens, R.J. Lechmere Guppy. For some reason, he neglected to note that seven years earlier, another scientist, one W. Peters, had named the type specimen of the same species, caught in a river in Caracas, *Poecilia reticulata.* Nonetheless, the fish continued to be identified as *Girardinas guppyi* until about 1910, when the genus was changed to *Acanthocephalus.* About 1915, the fish was placed again in the genus *Lebistes,* and *reticulatus* retrieved as the first name given to this species.

It seems that Plantagenet Lechmere Guppy, the son of R.J. Lechmere Guppy, started to use the common name of **guppy-fish,** possibly in 1934. By the 1950s, the fish had become a popular international aquarium fish, generally known as **guppy;** in some pet stores it was even called **Trinidad guppy.** Locally, it was known as guppy, but more commonly as **millions, mosquito fish,** and **rainbow fish.** The situation is further muddied by the fact that there is another kind of guppy in Trinidad which was confused with the first. It is now named *Poecilia vivipara* (although some authors refer to it as *Poecilia reticulata*), and is commonly called **brackish water millions.**

In certain circumstances, a Latin name can in fact become the vernacular. The first major outbreak of rabies in Trinidad in 1925 led people to become very conversant with its primary vector:

"Colin C. Sanborn, former Curator of Mammals of the [Chicago Natural History Museum], visited Trinidad in 1954 to study the local bats and remarked that Trinidad was the only country in which he had collected bats where the local people did not think his interest strange and where so many people referred to bats by their scientific names. It is not at all unusual to hear *"Desmodus rufus, Hemiderma,* and *Artibeus"* mentioned in everyday conversations and to have the speakers point out that they are talking about a 'rabies or poison bat.'" (Goodwin and Greenhall, 1961: 3).

Butterflies turned out to have a problem caused by someone almost too much in favour of vernacular names. After the diligent recording of the common names given in Malcolm Barcant's 1970 *Butterflies of Trinidad and Tobago*, it was startling to read his almost offhand remarks on names:

"It should be mentioned that in Trinidad, while several well-known butterflies bear equally well-known local names, a large number of species have never been given such names at all. For the first time, for the sake of local flavour and to stimulate greater interest in our butterfly life, I have taken it upon myself to give what to me seem appropriate local names to many butterflies which never enjoyed such esteem in the past. By those who know, these new labels will be recognised as such. For those who are not acquainted with the old labels, it will not matter.

"While it was fairly easy to determine that a name such as **silver-banded hairstreak** was not a popular invention, others were more difficult. It took a number of letters to lepidopterist societies to track down Barcant in Florida, but shortly before his death he managed to send in a copy of his index to popular names, with those names he had invented himself marked off, so that their origin can now be retrieved.

Most Trinidad and Tobago animals have not only Latin and English names, but also local ones, sometimes several. *Coereba flaveola,* the bananaquit, is known as **sikiyey** (French Creole from French **sucrier** 'sugarbowl') in Trinidad, but as **sugarbird** in Tobago, where there was never much French Creole influence; both names reflect the bird's habit of taking sugar from household sugarbowls. The tiny blue-black grassquit, *Volatinia jacarina,* has several popular names which reflect different aspects of its appearance and behaviour: **ci-ci zeb** (French Creole from French **petit des herbes** 'little one of the grasses') and probably also the San Fernando name **grassee** because of its preferred habitat; **johnny jump-up** from its characteristic sudden vertical hops; **zwee** from the sound of its call; and **black poochi**, for reasons as yet unknown. Similarly, the blue-crowned mot-mot *Momotus momota,* is known as **king of the woods**, probably for its bright blue "crown" feathers, and as **bouhoutou** or **wutetetoo** from the sound of its soft hooting call.Some names are no longer used: **cachicama** or **kirtchecom** for **tatu**, *Dasypus novemcinctus,* the nine-banded armadillo; **guazoupita** (De Verteuil, 1884: 361) and **guazupita** (Kingsley, 1871, I: 172) for **biche**, itself becoming archaic in favour of **deer**, *Mazama americana*, the native deer.

Animals were named in different languages. Many of the oldest names, such as **manicou** – for the opossum *Didelphis marsupialis* – and **agouti** are Amerindian, although some came into French Creole, English, and English Creole via Spanish, the European language with the earliest extensive contact with Amerindian populations in most of South America and much of the Caribbean. Spanish itself contributed **galap** (from galapago), the fresh-water tortoise *Rhinoclemmys punctularia;* **morocoy** (from morrocoyo) the land tortoise *Geochelone denticulata;* **garrapat** (also **carapat** from **garrapata**), the tick *Amblyomma mixtum;* **matapel** (from **mataperro** 'dogkiller' because of its ability to kill a dog which attacks it), the anteater *Tamandua tetradactyla.*

French contributions include **jep** (from **guepe**), 'wasp' and **blue jacquot** for *Scarus coeruleus,* the blue parrotfish. One double French name is that for the bird *Euphonia violacea.* It was originally called **louis d'or simple** for its resemblance to the shiny gold coin of that name. Called by some **louis d'or,** now an archaic name, the second part has persisted in the common name **semp.**

Some French and French Creole words are in fact translations of African or other languages. **God horse** for the praying mantis is possibly a direct translation from Hausa **dokin Allah** 'Allah's horse', a likely basis for the identical meaning in Antillean French **cheval bon dieu** and French Creole **cheval bonjey** 'God's horse'. The word **kwilibee** 'hummingbird' is clearly related to French **colibri**, but this word is listed in French dictionaries as 'Antillean', and thus probably originated in an Amerindian language.

The legacy of the wealth of African language once spoken in Trinidad and Tobago has barely been explored, although it is unlikely that many African animal names supplanted the original Amerindian ones. Tobagonian **gomangala,** the green or brown lizard *Anolis richardii,* may be of African origin; **congoree,** millipede, is probably from the Kikongo **ngongolo.** Sometimes an African source is well camouflaged. For example, one name for the common lizards *Hemidactylus mabouia, Thecadactylus rapicauda* (both geckos) and *Polychrus marmoratus* (an iguanid) is **twenty-four hours:**

"because it is supposed to clamp itself upon a person's arm with such tenacity that only a hot iron applied to the green back will remove it. The remedy, however, is of no avail; within twenty-four hours the victim will die." (Bowman and Bowman, 1939: 251).

The name **twenty-four hours** is also found in French Creole as **vinkat**, from the French vingt-quatre 'twenty-four', but the origin of the belief itself is definitely African. Part of the lexicographer's job will be to find out which peoples – and hence which languages – might be the ultimate source. (Virtually no animal names from Hindi-Bhojpuri have been noted as yet.)

Sometimes newer names replaced older ones. Sometimes they existed simultaneously, for example, **diablotin** (French), **guacharo** (Spanish), or **oilbird** (English) for *Steatornis caripensis.* Sometimes names accumulated parts from different languages. For example, the oldest citation of a popular name for the small mammal *Caluromys philander* is **manicou gros-yeux** 'big-eyed manicou', followed by the French Creole form **manicou goziey.** English speakers wishing to make sure that the large eyes of the creature were noticed, and who did not understand French Creole, added **big-eye** and shifted the adjective **goziey** to a position before the noun it describes, as in English, hence **big-eye goziey manicou.**

Change in names is by no means a process only of the past. A current example of linguistic evolution is the small silver-coloured marine anchovy known as **fryers** in Tobago,

from its customary mode of preparation, and in Trinidad originally as **zanchois** or **jean-schwa** (French Creole, from French les anchois 'anchovies'). During the last few years, highway signs have advertised **joshua** and then **jashwar,** giving it the appearance of a Hindi word.

Disentangling names is complicated by geographical region and multiple naming. One day, helping a friend's grandchildren make a sand pile on the beach at Mayaro, one of the authors uncovered a small fast-moving animal in the sand. Assured by the children that she could pick it up without harm, she caught a white, hard-shelled, crab-like animal. "Is a tatu," she was informed, "Yuh could eat dem." They had no difficulty – unfortunately – finding an empty sweet-drink bottle amongst the litter on the beach; the animal was taken to the U.W.I.'s Dept. of Zoology, where it was identified as *Emerita portoricensis,* a crustacean. But the confusion over its vernacular name continued.

That particular animal is known as **tatu** or **sea tatu** in Mayaro and neighbouring areas, probably because of the resemblance of its articulated bands to those of its land-dwelling namesake, the armadillo, and because of its similar digging ability. It is also known as **kochikong** (from **kirtchecom**, an archaic name for the armadillo noted by De Verteuil) and **sea cockroach**. However, **sea cockroach** in Tobago and northern Trinidad also refers to the chitons, *Chiton marmoratus* or *Acanthopleura granulata.* These chitons are also known as **pacro**, a name which also refers in some areas to a black or dark brown mollusk which lives on shore rocks, and is made into pacro water, a supposed aphrodisiac. Yet another **sea cockroach** is *Sphaeroma* sp., a small, many-legged, millipede-like arthropod often seen scuttling over rocks and sea-walls. The word tatu is also used to identify the wasp known as **jep tatu,** *Synoeca surinama,* whose carton nests are built in bands resembling the armadillo's.

Although many animals can be instantly and accurately identified by non-specialists, snakes in Trinidad and Tobago tend to be divided into two popular categories: **mapepires,** for anything dark or brown in colour; and **corals,** for any snake with red on it. But snake names are often vividly descriptive and metaphoric. For example, the **lora,** *Leptophis ahaetulla,* is called by the Spanish word for parrot because of the snake's emerald green colouring, which resembles that of the yellow-crested green parrot. The **mapepire zanana,** *Lachesis muta,* is called by the French Creole word for pineapple to describe its carinated, tubercled, diamond-shaped scales. **Mapepire balsain** (French Creole , from French valsant 'waltzing'), *Bothrops atrox,* is named for the circling motion it make in self-defence, or when settling down. (This snake is also known as **mapepire barcin (barsin),** showing the common creole variation of l/r, and b/v.)

Sometimes connections can be made between words for animals and other aspects of culture. For example, the coil in which a mapepire rests is called a **kata,** the same word used for the pad – also of African origin – originally made of woven grass, used to cushion loads carried on the head.

By naming things, we make them our own, and we become in a way responsible for them. The study of the words which name our native animals can remind us of how rich, how valuable and how fragile our wildlife is.

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