

The colonial legacy in Sancti Spíritus

El legado colonial en Sancti Spíritus

Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez¹ , Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal¹

¹Instituto Superior de Relaciones Internacionales “Raúl Roa García”, Licenciatura en Relaciones Internacionales.

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ABSTRACT

The towns of La Santísima Trinidad and El Espíritu Santo, founded on December 23, 1513, and June 4, 1514, respectively, by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar in Cuba, incorporated distinctive colonial elements into their architecture and culture that have evolved throughout the country's history. Although the passage of time has transformed these settlements, certain features remain in the current context of the province of Sancti Spíritus, reflecting the idiosyncrasies of its population. Architecture, cultural and religious traditions, the economic model, and demographic aspects are pillars that give the Sancti Spíritus region a marked colonial legacy, which coexists with modern characteristics, giving this territory a remarkable uniqueness.

Keywords: Sancti Spíritus; Colonial Legacy; Architecture; Culture; Idiosyncrasy.

RESUMEN

La Villa de la Santísima Trinidad y la Villa del Espíritu Santo, fundadas respectivamente el 23 de diciembre de 1513 y el 4 de junio de 1514 por Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar en Cuba, incorporaron elementos coloniales distintivos en su arquitectura y cultura que han evolucionado a lo largo de la historia nacional. Aunque el pa-so del tiempo ha transformado estos asentamientos, ciertos rasgos perduran en el contexto actual de la pro-vincia de Sancti Spíritus, reflejando la idiosincrasia de su población. La arquitectura, las tradiciones cultura-les y religiosas, el modelo económico y aspectos demográficos son pilares que confieren a la región espiritu-na un marcado legado colonial, el cual coexiste con características modernas, otorgando a este territorio una singularidad notable.

Palabras clave: Sancti Spíritus; Legado Colonial; Arquitectura; Cultura; Idiosincrasia.

INTRODUCTION

The formation of Cuban identity and nationality has its origins in the conquest and colonization carried out by the Spanish Crown. These processes led to the convergence of multiple cultural, economic, and political factors, as well as ways of life and religious traditions, which became characteristic features of “Cubanness.” The prolonged Spanish rule over the island brought with it the incorporation of Hispanic elements that remain to this day, including language, infrastructure, daily and cultural customs, and political and administrative divisions.

The mark of the former metropolis can be seen throughout the country due to the extension of Spanish authority across the entire national territory. However, this colonial heritage is most noticeable and palpable in the old towns founded by Diego Velázquez between 1511 and 1515 in the Greater Antilles. These features are complemented, and even highlighted, by others typical of the subsequent introduction of modernity in Cuba.

In this regard, the current province of Sancti Spíritus has become one of the prominent examples of the predominance of the Spanish component on the island. This territory is home to two of the largest and oldest original towns: Villa del Espíritu Santo and Villa de la Santísima Trinidad. The preservation of their colonial legacy has positioned them as attractive tourist and research destinations.

The objective of this research is to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the colonial legacy in the province of Sancti Spíritus through newspaper articles and personal sources. To this end, the authors propose delving into the characteristics that denote the persistence of colonial features in the territory, specifically in architecture, culture, demographics, and the economic model. To this end, methods and techniques such as bibliographic research and analysis, analysis-synthesis, historical-logical analysis, and interviews will be used.

DEVELOPMENT

When discussing the colonial legacy in Sancti Spíritus, it is essential to highlight the architectural and cultural wealth that remains in the region. Since the founding of the towns of Santísima Trinidad in 1513 and Espíritu Santo in 1514 by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, colonial influence has left a deep mark on the province. The architecture of the colonial zone, which encompasses styles such as Spanish Baroque, regional or Creole, and Neoclassical, reflects the different construction periods from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

In addition, the fusion of Hispanic and African cultures has enriched the music, literature, visual arts, dance, and architecture of Sancti Spíritus, making it an invaluable cultural treasure. Likewise, the devotion to Catholicism in the 17th and 18th centuries has left a strong religious structure in the city, turning churches into centers of knowledge and culture. These elements are intertwined with Cuba’s history and enrich the region’s cultural heritage.

Architecture

Sancti Spíritus is one of Cuba’s cities with distinctive colonial architecture. Its historic center still preserves buildings that have enriched its urban environment for centuries. The colonial area of Sancti Spíritus is a convergence of the different architectural styles characteristic of the 17th and 19th centuries: Spanish Baroque, Creole, and Neoclassical.

The most representative works in Sancti Spíritus, and where authentic symbols of the colonial period stand out, are the bridge over the Yayabo River and the Main Parish Church. These buildings are joined by others of significant importance, such as the Palacio Valle, the former mansion of one of the wealthiest families in the region.

Also known as the “House of a Hundred Doors,” it houses the Museum of Colonial Art and other buildings integrated into the urban center, which was declared a National Monument in 1978.

The bridge over the Yayabo River is a road structure considered a colonial jewel of the island’s center and one of the main icons of the city of Sancti Spíritus. It is also the only example of its kind that remains in the country. It is over 9 meters high and approximately 85 meters long.

Its construction began in 1817 at Paso de las Carretas and was not completed until 1825. It has five arches, which decrease in height from the center of the river to its banks. Local legend has it that the materials used for the work (brick, lime, and sand) were mixed with donkey milk, which is why the structure remains in good condition.

The Museum of Colonial Art was built in the 18th century. It is located in one of the mansions belonging to the Valle Iznaga family. It is a majestic two-story building, the first of its kind in the city during the colonial period.

The place is also known as the “House of a Hundred Doors” because it has that number of openings between doors and windows.

The structure features thick beams of precious wood, French-style shutters, fan-shaped stained glass windows, and beautiful interior courtyards. Its rooms are decorated in the style of the 19th-century Creole bourgeoisie. Similarly, carved furniture made from Cuban woods such as mahogany and cedar is on display.⁽¹⁾

The Main Parish Church is the main Catholic building in the fourth town. It stands out for its architectural charms and the many legends woven around it. Completed in 1680 in a Baroque and Romantic style, it is the oldest dated building in Sancti Spíritus and the oldest religious temple in Cuba.⁽²⁾

The parish church is a Creole manifestation with Moorish architectural influences, expressed in the use of Arabic techniques, combined with Christian design, and adapted to the island’s conditions and materials. Its cultural significance earned it the status of National Monument in 1977.

The church consists of two chapels, a bell tower, and a long, rectangular nave with brick walls and an artistically crafted cedar roof covered with Creole tiles. Its main entrance has a pediment that is taller than it is wide, consisting of a door, three medium-sized

windows, and a niche at the top.

The main door is known as “The Door of Forgiveness”; legend has it that a rich and proud woman is buried here. In her will, she expressed her desire to be buried in this place as a sign of repentance for her contempt for people with low incomes. There, at the entrance to the parish, everyone who entered would pass over her corpse, and she would achieve divine forgiveness.

The bell tower, which stands out for its 40-meter height, is composed of three cubic sections and features a dome at the top, replacing the old pyramidal top damaged by several weather events. This tower was the tallest on the island when the church was completed in the 17th century.

Another significant element of the complex is the arch separating the nave from the presbytery, the only one of its kind in Cuba, whose construction is associated with the visit to the town by a high-ranking Catholic Church dignitary. The element is made entirely of wood and features gilded reliefs on both sides, adorned with an inscription from 1739.

These values make the Main Parish Church one of the most outstanding buildings in the historic center of Trinidad. It is also an essential component of the island’s colonial history and culture, and an authentic architectural relic, proof of the town’s antiquity.

On the other hand, the city of Trinidad has one of the best-preserved colonial architectural complexes in the entire American continent.

Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988, it was the third town founded on the island by Diego Velázquez in 1513.

It is currently considered a museum city with a significant colonial architectural heritage, which gives it a unique atmosphere representative of the period. The urban context of Trinidad comprises a collection of vernacular domestic buildings, where early 18th-century constructions, strongly influenced by Andalusian and Mudejar styles, are mixed with more elaborate 19th-century neoclassical models.⁽³⁾

The magnificent condition of the buildings and the urban ensemble of Trinidad reliably expresses the authenticity of its values. The preserved image of the city is a dynamic system where urbanization, architecture, interior spaces, public areas, and its people create a unique place.

The buildings are predominantly single-family dwellings, which avoid overcrowding or excessive occupation common to other historic centers while contributing significantly to maintaining the original interior environments. Trinidad has maintained traditional construction techniques and materials for centuries, including lime mortar, wood, clay tiles, and cobblestone streets.

As an inseparable part of the city, the Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills) displays the most representative archaeological and industrial remains of sugar production during that period, the life of the wealthy Creole landowners, and the slave system that prevailed at the time, all in a visible rural setting. Houses, barracks, and industrial components remain, and sugar cane cultivation continues to be the main activity, as does the use of the railroad and road network.

The Valley of the Sugar Mills is an exceptional landscape, representative of the boom in agro-industrial sugar production and indicative of the most advanced development of sugar production at that time. Here, a traditional habitat has been maintained, with deep-rooted customs ranging from crafts and music to religious beliefs and other ways of life that are still in force.

Trinidad not only preserves the elements that make up its architecture, but also presents its indigenous urban fabric intact, with its irregular system of squares and plazas, the original cobblestones of its streets, and other elements of great historical and urban integration.⁽³⁾

The city of Trinidad is one of the most notable examples of urban planning in the first settlements founded in Latin America in the 16th century. Its landscape shows a heterogeneity of buildings whose expression ranges from the popular and modest to the more elaborate and even luxurious, in which a peculiar adaptation to the climate is evident through interior courtyards, balconies, screens, shutters, and other elements typical of its architecture.

The town is a living testimony to the recurrent use of local construction techniques and materials, such as rubble or mud walls, wooden roofs protected by clay tiles, and other popular interpretations of the basic elements of architecture, which give it a marked sense of the time and place in which it was built. In the Valley, the haciendas, bell towers, barracks, road networks, and countless archaeological remains are the best-preserved reflection of the Caribbean sugar agro-industrial process of the 18th and 19th centuries and the slave phenomenon associated with it.

Trinidad and the Valle de los Ingenios are relevant examples of architectural and urban qualities, as well as of an economic model that provided sustenance and wealth to the colonial town.

Although the most outstanding examples of colonial architecture in Sancti Spíritus are found in its two original towns, they are not exclusive to them. The Torre de Yero (Annex 6) is an emblematic building located in Cabaiguán. It is the only 19th-century building in the municipality.⁽⁴⁾

The tower owes its name to Nicolás Yero, one of its owners. The monument is built of brick and has a two-story structure. The first floor consists of four columns, which become pillars crowned by a bell on the second floor.

Currently, the Yero Tower functions as a cultural center, hosting exhibitions, events, and recreational activities for visitors. It is a very popular destination among tourists visiting the region, as it symbolizes the area’s traditional architecture and stands out for its imposing presence and architectural beauty.

Cultural and religious traditions

The central province is heir to significant colonial aspects of a cultural and religious nature. First, the names of the main cities, Sancti

Spíritus and Trinidad allude to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity of Roman Catholic Christianity, the religion imposed on the island by Spanish priests.

In terms of religious customs, one of the most characteristic of the colonial period that remains in force is the pilgrimage to Loma del Obispo. Documents from the period state that this mountain owes its current name to the first architect of this action, Bishop Espada y Landa, who also officiated a mass at the summit, blessing the city (1819). A seven-meter cross stands at the summit, commemorating this event. The traditional pilgrimage takes place every January 1 and is led by members of Catholic schools and other religious entities on the island.⁽⁵⁾

In the cultural sphere, the Parrandas del Centro occupy a special place, having been declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) during the 13th Session of the Intangible Heritage Committee. This tradition, which originated in Remedios, Villa Clara, gradually spread throughout the center of the country and has endured for more than 200 years. Currently, they are celebrated annually in 18 towns.⁽⁶⁾

In the province of Yayabo, the Parrandas de Guayos are notable as the most popular. Although this celebration initially had a religious character, after incorporating other elements, it has become a showcase of the country's and region's folklore and cultural mix, providing an ideal setting for the convergence of the traditional and the contemporary. Other significant patron saint festivals that continue to be celebrated in the province of Sancti Spíritus include San Gregorio, the feast of the Holy Spirit, the Bullfighting Festivities, and the Santo Cristo del Consuelo.

On the other hand, the province is characterized by a traditional family structure, with a marked patriarchal character typical of peninsular customs, where the man assumes the role of provider and head of the household. Similarly, the daily life of the people of Sancti Spíritus reflects the lifestyle of the metropolis, which includes cultural nightlife, theater visits, concerts, and walks through the parks.

Likewise, the cuisine retains its colonial-era roots. Local dishes such as ajiaco and ropa vieja, which result from the fusion of Hispanic and African culinary traditions, remain popular and are considered symbols of Cuban gastronomic culture.

Similarly, there are traditional drinks such as Canchánchara, which, although it originated in eastern Cuba during the wars of independence, was revived by a team from the Trinidad Museum of Architecture in the early 1980s. Since then, this drink has become an icon of the central city, which hosted the first international "La Canchánchara" festival in December 2023.

The area also stood out for its early development in the artistic and musical sphere, which emerged as a cultural melting pot, a union of Canarian-Andalusian styles and Afro-Cuban influences in the Congos de Trinidad cabildos.⁽⁷⁾ One of the characteristic colonial features that has endured in the Villa del Yayabo is the Coro de Clave de Sancti Spíritus, the only survivor of this musical format in Cuba and the world, which maintains its artistic quality despite more than two centuries since its foundation.

The province also stands out for its strong tradition of craftsmanship, with colonial techniques passed down to the present day. Such is the case of the Santander and Navia families in Trinidad and Sancti Spíritus, respectively. Both families maintain workshops where they have been working with clay for centuries, and whose work is recognized throughout the Caribbean region. As a result, the town of Trinidad was declared a World Craft City by the World Crafts Council (WWC) in 2018.⁽⁸⁾

Another reference point for the cultural heritage of Sancti Spíritus is its designation as "the land of the guayabera," acclaimed as the place of origin of this garment representative of Cuban culture. Hence, there is a museum dedicated to the collection and conservation of this illustrious piece of clothing. The Casa de la Guayabera is located in the Santa Elena estate, in the center of the town of Sancti Spíritus and on the banks of the Yayabo River. Behind its doors are guayaberas worn by significant historical figures such as Fidel and Raúl Castro, Gabriel García Márquez, Hugo Chávez, Alicia Alonso, Miguel Barnet, and others.

Demographic aspects

An unusual yet characteristic aspect of the colonial stamp on Sancti Spíritus is its demographic profile. Underlying the economic model imposed by Spain are marked differences between the territories located in the north and south of the province. This led to different behavior in the two latitudes in terms of the economy, emigration, and demographic growth and composition.

According to a census carried out in the town of Sancti Spíritus in 1774, the population was 8,265, of whom 5,633 were white, both sexes, and the rest were free mulattos and enslaved people.⁽⁹⁾ These data indicate a superiority of the white and free population over the existing enslaved Black people, something quite peculiar at this historical moment. Similarly, by 1792, the city had 10 625 inhabitants, including 833 enslaved people of African descent.⁽¹⁰⁾

The reason for this phenomenon was the nature of the economy, which focused on livestock and tobacco, sectors that did not require slave labor, as well as the characteristics of migration to the region, mainly from the Canary Islands and the peninsula. As a result, in the center and north of the province, concentrations of white inhabitants predominate in the cities, while the African population is more abundant in the countryside.⁽¹¹⁾

Since colonial times, miscegenation and racial heterogeneity have been defining features of the island. However, this racial disparity remains noticeable (although it was not documented in the consulted bibliography), except in Trinidad, where it is more balanced.⁽¹²⁾

In this sense, the southern region, mainly Trinidad, was greatly influenced by the development of the sugar industry in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Thus, it became a benchmark for sugar cane agricultural development, with the Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills) being a highly productive area. As a result, in the 1827 census, 12 543 inhabitants were registered in Trinidad's urban area alone (28 706 in the entire territory), of whom approximately two-thirds were black slaves and a minority were free mulattos. Currently, Trinidad is the largest center of concentration of the black population in the province and has marked cultural and economic differences.⁽¹³⁾

CONCLUSIONS

The Spanish colonial legacy in Sancti Spíritus has left a significant mark on various aspects of its culture, creating a unique and enriching identity that endures to this day. Preserving this historical legacy is essential to understanding and appreciating the local history and Hispanic heritage of this Cuban province.

Colonial architecture stands out in the province, with well-preserved historic buildings and monuments that reflect the colony's cultural richness and economic splendor. Its most outstanding examples are found in the main towns of Sancti Spíritus and Trinidad, where Baroque, Neoclassical, and Creole styles merge, and colonial heritage sites remain intact, attracting large numbers of tourists.

The founding of the towns in the 16th century led to the fusion of Hispanic and African cultures in Sancti Spíritus. This has given rise to an unparalleled cultural richness, manifested in music, religion, festivals, and customs passed down from generation to generation. The conservation and dissemination of this heritage have been a fundamental pillar in preserving the province's cultural identity.

In terms of demographics, the Spanish presence and the consequences of their economic activities, such as sugar and tobacco production, have shaped the ethnic composition of Sancti Spíritus. The mixing of races has given rise to a diverse and multicultural population, with Hispanic and African influences intertwined with local traditions, creating a unique identity.

FINANCING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Data curation: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Formal analysis: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Research: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Methodology: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Project management: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Resources: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Software: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Supervision: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Validation: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Visualization: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Writing – original draft: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

Writing – review and editing: Cristian Lorenzo Jiménez Sánchez; Javier Ernesto Díaz Oyarzabal.

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