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CONTESTING THE PAST: NARRATIVES OF
TRINIDAD & TOBAGO HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Historians and social scientists agree that nationalisms and national identities, ethnicities and ethnic identities, are all constructed or “invented” at specific historical conjunctures, and that the creation of narratives about the past is nearly always an important aspect of this process. The recent (June 2006) declaration by the Florida state legislature – that American history as taught in the state’s schools “shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed ... and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence” – thus flies in the face of decades of academic consensus about how “history” is written.¹ Every past, every claim to truth about the past, is open to interpretation. As Barry Schwartz (quoted in Johnson 2003:17) has put it, “recollecting the past is an active constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present.” All postcolonial states, in particular, have undergone a process of national self-creation, a process of identity formation involving “a recasting of history to produce a usable past” as Howard Johnson (2003:1) has said of Jamaica.

Nationalisms are invented, and their claims to historical continuity are always expressions of ideological and political concerns, and this is equally true of the construction of ethnicities and ethnic narratives. “Nations are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions,” writes Timothy Brennan (1990:49). The same point is made by T.H. Eriksen (1992:21, see also 22-33, 58-59, 142-44) in his examination of nationalism in Mauritius and Trinidad & Tobago: “Historicism – the creation of historical

1. See J.L. Bell, History 101: Florida’s Flawed Lesson Plan, on the History News Network, <http://hnn.us/articles/28095.html>.

traditions justifying present practices and beliefs – is an important feature of many contexts of ethnicity, as well as nationalism.” He argues that Benedict Anderson’s (1983) seminal concept of nations as imagined communities is nowhere more evidently true than in states, like Trinidad & Tobago, which are “colonially created,” places with virtually no precolonial past on which to draw for images and “traditions” (albeit invented) from ancient inhabitants of the national space. In such countries, there can be no depicting of the nation as a primordial community; it must be defined from scratch, as it were. All the newly created national symbols and narratives must “struggle to seem credible,” lacking as they do the ability to draw on “hazy collective memories of a rich semi-mythical past” (Brennan 1990:58). As Brennan (1990:49, 58) puts it, postcolonial states are typically “chasing a national identity after the fact,” that is, after the formal establishment of a nation-state.

All national narratives necessarily invoke certain definitions of national, ethnic, racial, and regional identities in an effort to create usable and credible histories that legitimate specific political and ideological projects. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to argue that some are better grounded in empirical evidence than others. Moreover, while nationalisms are invented, in the words of Anthony Smith (1986:211), “nations are not fixed and immutable entities ‘out there’ ... but neither are they completely malleable and fluid processes and attitudes, at the mercy of every outside force.” One can accept that all national narratives are cultural fictions and imaginary constructs, yet believe that not all have the same “truth value.”

Postcolonial states typically struggle to create a “universalist” historical narrative, a single linear story which captures the “whole” past of the new nation, presumably the intention of the Florida legislators with respect to the history of the not so new nation they belong to. The historical narratives often produced by ethnic groups or local/regional communities may be seen as a threat to this single narrative. Generally the kind of narrative produced before and after independence by former colonies centers on heroic anticolonial struggles, culminating in the attainment of formal nationhood, and usually ignoring or obfuscating internal divisions whether of ethnicity, region, class, or gender. Gert Oostindie (2005:159-71) has described this kind of history-making in Suriname, a formerly Dutch colony in South America of which the population is even more diverse than that of Trinidad & Tobago. Johnson (2003, 2007) has examined a similar process in Jamaica, where the effort was to replace loyalties to Britain and her empire with a nationalist ethos forged through the creation of an authorized Jamaican historical narrative with formally enshrined “national heroes”; while in Barbados, the minister of education in 2001 (quoted in Beckles *et al.* 2001:6) hoped that the earlier (1998) declaration of such heroes there would show “there is a distinct Barbadian, irrespective of colour, class or religion.”²

2. See also Eriksen 1992:58-67, Nanton 2007.

But the emergence of ethnic or regionalist narratives, especially in highly pluralist societies like Suriname, Mauritius, and Trinidad & Tobago, would inevitably destabilize the linear nationalist histories created around the time of independence to counter the older colonialist versions.

COLONIALIST NARRATIVES

Trinidad & Tobago may be said to have generated not one, but two hegemonic historical narratives during the colonial era (Brereton 1999:580-90). First, there was the normal British type of colonial or imperial history, concentrating on the conquest of the larger island from Spain in 1797, and the settlement of the smaller one from 1763, and the development of plantation agriculture and later the oil industry by British capital and management. Of course this kind of history focused on the deeds of British soldiers and sailors, governors and other officials, planters and entrepreneurs, and had a distinct leaning to problems of colonial government and constitution-making. This narrative line may be said to have started with the publication in 1838 of E.L. Joseph's history (the first book-length study of Trinidad's past) and to have ended with Gertrude Carmichael's narrative which appeared in 1961 just before independence. But it must be admitted that the British "imperial" narrative for Trinidad and (though to a lesser extent) Tobago is distinctly thin, not to say weak, in comparison say with Barbados or Jamaica. No doubt this reflects Trinidad's late entry into the British Empire (1797, compared with 1627 for Barbados and 1655 for Jamaica), its "foreign" (Spanish and French) character, and the fact that it was never really an arena for heroic deeds of warfare once the island had been captured – and that without serious resistance. Tobago could boast of a period when she was "fought over" by various European powers, including Britain, so the imperial narrative tended to be stronger, and longer, for that island than for Trinidad. The members of the Trinidad colonial elite who were most committed to the imperial narrative were, not surprisingly, the white Creoles of English descent. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, they engaged in various "culture wars" with the more numerous elites of "foreign" (French, Spanish, Corsican) ancestry, on issues such as religion and the position of the Catholic Church, education, language, and legal traditions. Their aim was to support the colonial government's program of "anglicization" and to stake out a claim as the "natural" leaders of society in a British colony. We find them, for example, organizing high-profile celebrations in 1897 of the centenary of British rule, an event that was regarded with much more ambivalence by the "foreign" descended elites (Wood 1968; Brereton 1999:581, 584).

But early there appeared a second colonialist history, which I call the "French Creole" narrative. Trinidad was never a French colony (unlike Tobago, which was under French rule from 1781 to 1793 and again briefly

from 1802 to 1803), but immigrants from the French Antilles, France, and Corsica in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (and later) were responsible for developing the island as a plantation economy and a slave society, and their descendants became the main local landowning elite in the nineteenth century. The French Creole narrative was their story. It can be regarded as the first of the ethnic histories, but clearly it was both hegemonic (an elite narrative) and counterhegemonic in some respects, as a version of the past distinct from, and often critical of, the British colonial one.

The French Creole narrative received its first classic expression in the historical work by P.G.L. Borde, first published in French in 1876 and 1883. He wrote his history of Trinidad under Spain (i.e. up to 1797) to draw attention to the colonization of a Spanish island by a French population ("unique in history"), and thus to "revive the honour of our [French] ancestors." For Borde, an impoverished and "deserted" island, blighted by Spanish neglect, was transformed into a prosperous and civilized society by industrious and noble French settlers and their descendants. These settlers were eulogized by Borde as energetic, hard-working, cultured pioneers, devoted to their new home and their estates carved out of the "wilderness." Many were members of the prerevolutionary nobility; those who were not were still "accustomed to command" because of slavery, and formed in Trinidad "a veritable aristocracy of skin which conceded nothing in distinction to the aristocracy of blood." These were the people who, coming to a "desert and unproductive island," created a "flourishing agriculture and a brilliant commerce" in just a few years (1783-1797). "We, who are the children of this country," wrote Borde, "have a sacred duty to render honour and thanks to these energetic pioneers" (quoted in Brereton 1995:37-48; see also Brereton 1999:581-82).

An important element in the French Creole narrative related to slavery; though the French settlers were not the first to use enslaved African labor in Trinidad, they did transform the island into a slave society and were the main slave-owning group. The French Creole view of slavery in Trinidad was that it was exceptional: a mild, benevolent system run by patriarchal planters who managed their own estates in person with a judicious combination of kindness and firmness. The enslaved were like "grown children who had been handed over to their masters for instruction," according to Borde, "and this comparison is far from imaginary, as they formed part of the families of their masters." Slave children were raised in the great houses along with the white family, and life-long attachments were the result. Thanks to the benevolence of the French planters, "conditions were actually paternal" in Trinidad, and the slaves showed no resentment, no desire for vengeance. This view of the exceptionalism of slavery in Trinidad – reminiscent of similar arguments about Brazil associated with the Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre – has been an especially long-lasting dimension of the French Creole narrative (quoted in Brereton 1995:42-43; Dos Santos Gomes 2001:77-82).

This narrative focused on the pioneering activities of the French during the years between the Cedula of 1783, which encouraged their immigration to the Spanish colony, and the British capture in 1797. But it continued to tell the story of the French Creoles after 1797, a story of oppression and marginalization under the British regime. Under British governors, but especially in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, an “Anglicization” policy was embarked on, through which the pioneers of settlement and civilization were pushed aside: many lost their sugar estates to British capitalists and sank into genteel poverty; they were excluded from the legislature and from government posts; campaigns of persecution against Roman Catholics and “foreigners” were mounted. Through sacrifice and hard work, the French Creoles endured these various kinds of oppression, and built up the cocoa industry after around 1870 as the basis for their return to prosperity – and the basis for Trinidad’s solid economy in the late nineteenth century when so many other Caribbean islands were in deep depression. Through their skills and hard work, they built up their cocoa estates and established businesses, and emerged in the twentieth century as the true native, rooted in the island, aristocracy, playing a full role in the expansion of the island’s commerce, industry, and land development (Brereton 1998:32-70).

As Trinidad entered the period of decolonization and nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, the French Creoles (and by now the term was generally applied to all locally born “Whites,” not specifically to persons of French ancestry) considered that they were being again marginalized, if not actually persecuted and demonized, by the anticolonial party which formed the government in 1956 – the People’s National Movement (PNM) under Eric Williams. His rhetoric of “Massa Day Done,” his evident hostility to the “old” French Creole elite, his concern for the black majority who had voted for him, his attempts at redistributive justice, all destabilized the French Creole narrative. Today – if it continues at all – it is a story of local Whites being pushed to the margins of the nation, no longer even an economic elite (overtaken by Syrian/Lebanese, Chinese, and Indian entrepreneurs), without political clout, without any cultural status, national recognition through special public holidays or “Arrival Days,” or memorials to the pioneers. Perhaps it is, in fact, the end of the narrative: the disappearance of the French Creoles as a distinct group, the psychic if not physical eradication of local Whites in the national fabric. These themes are powerfully conveyed in a 2003 video on the French Creoles of Trinidad, evocatively titled *C’est Quitte* (it’s over), a nostalgic lament for a disappearing elite (Ryan 1999:239-40).³

3. The video *C’est Quitte: The French Creoles of Trinidad* was made by Alex de Verteuil, a member of Trinidad’s leading French Creole clan, in 2003. The French Creole narrative is also reflected in many of Anthony de Verteuil’s valuable books on Trinidad’s social history.

THE AFRO-CREOLE NARRATIVE

Both colonialist narratives were challenged, around the time of independence, as part of the search for a past which could help create a sense of nationalism, a process which (as we have noted) was commonplace throughout the rapidly decolonizing world in the 1950s and 1960s. This was generally the work of local intellectuals and academics, as well as foreign historians, as the writing of history in the former colonies became more professionalized, passing out of the hands of the gentry and the amateurs. In Trinidad & Tobago, the leader in this process was both an academic and statesman: Eric Williams, an Oxford-educated Ph.D. in history, founder of the PNM and unquestionably the dominant politician in the country between 1956 and his death in 1981. His *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, first published in 1962 as an independence “gift” to the new nation, became the iconic text of what can fairly be described as the anticolonial, Afro-Creole narrative.

In his introduction to the 1964 edition, Williams (1964:vii) wrote, “Colonial nationalism, in India, Africa and elsewhere, has given high priority to the rewriting of the history purveyed by metropolitan scholars, and to writing that history where the metropolitan country has ignored or by-passed it. The very fact of National Independence, therefore, made this history of Trinidad and Tobago mandatory.” And in the foreword to the original 1962 publication, he stated that the book’s primary objective was to encourage unity and to defeat the racial divisions caused by colonialism, to make a colony into a nation. It was a “National History,” a phrase he repeats several times in the brief foreword, “a manifesto of a subjugated people ... the Declaration of Independence of the united people of Trinidad and Tobago” – written by an academic historian who was also a party politician and the first prime minister of the new nation (Williams 1962:viii).

This influential book, a brilliant, highly original, at times polemical essay, is above all an anticolonial history. Its central theme is the devastation wrought on the two islands by four centuries of colonialism, Spanish, British, and French, and the people’s struggles to overcome that legacy. Trinidad suffered from the “bankruptcy of Spanish colonialism” (the title of Chapter 3) and then neglect and contempt from the British under the Crown Colony system. Tobago, after suffering from “a state of betweenity” (the title of Chapter 6) when she was fought over in the seventeenth century by several powers, fell into the hands of the British who were responsible for her long economic decline in the nineteenth century, which in turn led to her annexation to Trinidad at the end of that century. At several points in the book, Williams “pauses” the narrative to attack racist writings about Africans by European and other intellectuals, and to demolish them. As he wrote in his conclusion, all the ethnic groups in the new nation had been “victims of the same subordination, all have been tarred with the same brush of political inferiority ...

All have been maligned for centuries – the Amerindians as subhuman, the Africans as closer to the ape ... the Indians as savages ... the Chinese as a passive people and a negative element” (Williams 1964:278, see also Williams 1962:30-39, 86-121, 167-95).

But this was not only an anticolonial history; it was also the most influential expression of the Afro-Creole narrative of Trinidad & Tobago’s past. The book projected the clear view that people of African or part-African descent – Creoles in local terminology – were the most important constituent group in the nation, the core Trinidadians (for Tobagonians, though overwhelmingly African, were not seen as entirely part of that core). The core Trinidadian culture was “creole culture,” associated with that group; the people who would, and should, inherit the political kingdom when the colonialists left were the Creoles. These assumptions, very often unexamined, were held by most Trinidadians of African or mixed descent; as C.L.R. James (mentor, colleague and then political opponent of Williams) once put it, they felt that Trinidad, “as part of the Caribbean, is predominantly their field of operation” (Singh 1993:102). In 1962, the Creoles constituted the single largest group in the national population, but the Afro-Creole narrative was not the product of simple majority demography. Williams himself, of course, was of African descent (with some “French Creole blood” too), and the party he led to power in 1956, the PNM, had a mainly Creole voting base though its rhetoric and literature were always nationalistic rather than ethnic. But the Afro-Creole narrative was not simply the product of party politics either. It came from a view of Trinidad’s history which saw the descendants of the slaves, and of the free Blacks and “Coloureds,” as the people who had been in the island for the longest time, who had suffered from slavery and endured the “ordeal of free labor,” who had produced educated leaders in the twentieth-century fight for self-government and trade unionism, who had forged the indigenous cultural forms of the island – and who enjoyed the moral and historical “right” to succeed the British in the governance of the new nation.

This view of the country’s history is clearly expressed in its iconic text. The enslavement of the Africans is seen as the formative event in the two islands’ past, and, of course, Williams rejects the French Creole idea that slavery was peculiarly benign and paternalist in Trinidad. After emancipation in the 1830s, the central story was the struggle of the former slaves against a racist and uncaring colonial state. Williams devotes considerable space to demolishing racist views about Africans, and to defending the ex-slaves from the attacks on them by nineteenth-century British writers. The chapter that deals with indentured Indian immigration is titled “The Contribution of the Indians”: as late arrivals they made a “contribution” to the society but were not part of its core, constituting group. While this chapter is a powerful narrative of the degradation and oppression of the indentureds, it certainly

offers no positive view of Indian culture; it tries to link their presence to technological retardation in the sugar industry (a dubious argument), and it approvingly quotes, at great length, the anti-immigration speech by the African-Trinidadian legislator C.P. David in 1904. Needless to say, the culmination of the whole narrative is the emergence of the PNM, with its strongly Creole voting base and a leadership which was largely (though never exclusively) African-Trinidadian, and its achievements in office between 1956 and 1962. Among those achievements was a cultural renaissance, the flowering of “native forms of culture,” calypso, steelband, carnival, folk dances and songs – all forms associated primarily with African-Trinidadians (Williams 1964:30-39, 86-121, 167-95, 242-77).

The Afro-Creole narrative, as expressed by Williams, was also strongly nationalist. Its message was that all the *other* ethnic groups were part of the new nation and must suppress their unique cultures in the interest of nation-building. In a famous and much-quoted paragraph, he wrote, “Only together can they build a society, can they build a nation, can they build a homeland. There can be no Mother India ... no Mother Africa ... no Mother England ... no Mother China ... no Mother Syria or no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognise is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children.” Williams cautioned his fellow Creoles that “the Trinidad and Tobago society is living a lie and heading for trouble if it seeks to create the impression or allow others to act under the delusion that Trinidad and Tobago is an African society” (Williams 1964:279). Yet the message that it was the other ethnicities that would need to subsume their cultures into the *national* – creole – matrix was clear enough. The very last words of his book are an appeal to the people to work toward building the nation, because “this will be their final emancipation from slavery, this will be their final demonstration that slavery is not by nature and that the humblest antecedents are not inconsistent with greatness of soul” (Williams 1964:282). It was surely an ethnic as well as a nationalist appeal; or, rather, they were the same in the Afro-Creole narrative (Williams 1964:279, 282).

It seems fair to state that the Afro-Creole nationalist narrative, given classic expression in Williams’s iconic text, became the hegemonic narrative of Trinidad & Tobago’s past in the decades after 1962, the framework for academic and non-academic works on the country’s history (Brereton 1999:586-90).⁴ Outside the domain of history writing, there can be no doubt that the cultural symbols of the new nation in this period were drawn primarily from the African or Creole matrix. As the Norwegian anthropologist T.H. Eriksen (1992:122) put it in 1992, “every Trinidadian knows that public

4. I would include here my own general history of Trinidad (Brereton 1981), as well as Donald Wood’s (1968) classic on nineteenth-century Trinidad. See also Trotman 2006.

Trinidad is strongly dominated by cultural symbols and emblems associated with black New World culture” (Eriksen 1992:122, 129, 147-50). Trinidadian (but not really Tobagonian) national identity was closely linked with cultural forms associated with Creoles; these were the forms which were recognized as “authentic” and “national,” by the state and by majority public opinion. These forms, Afro-Creole rather than “African,” were seen as the core, defining culture of the nation: carnival, calypso, steelband music, Christmas and Easter, Best Village and parang. They were relentlessly promoted by the state in tourism-oriented propaganda as the national culture, as Raymond Ramcharitar (2006) points out, making the core of nationalism a complex associated primarily with an ethnic group (and, arguably, with a particular political party which was in power without a break from 1956 to 1986). Moreover, Afro-Creoles by and large saw themselves as “more Trinidadian” than anyone else, as people with a sense of stronger rights to the country – because of their prior “arrival” and longer “residence,” because “their” culture was promoted as national, because “their” party controlled the state. It is the same in Suriname, where the Creoles refer to themselves as “us Surinamese” and use an ethnic denominator for the “others” (Hindustani, Javanese and others) (Oostindie 2005:72-73). The Afro-Creole historical narrative helped to shape (and was shaped by) a hegemonic understanding of what was Trinidadian, what was national, and what was “other.”⁵

CHALLENGES TO THE AFRO-CREOLE NARRATIVE

Almost from the moment that Williams’s iconic text appeared, but especially from the late 1960s, there were efforts to interrogate and destabilize the Afro-Creole narrative of the nation’s history. It was a narrative which tended to marginalize significant groups: the indigenous people (the “Caribs”), Tobagonians, Indo-Trinidadians, and even the African (as opposed to the Creole) element in the national culture. In the processes of “culture wars” common to poly-ethnic states like Trinidad & Tobago, the past was contested in order to make claims for the present and the future. The alternative or oppositional narratives which emerged generally developed in the domain of “public history” rather than in formal historiography, and academic historians were not necessarily significantly involved in their generation. The rest of this paper, which discusses four such alternative narratives, is concerned with this kind of public production of knowledge about the nation’s past rather than academic history writing. I should also note that I have made no attempt to study imaginative literature, especially novels, as sources for narratives of the nation; of course, I recognize the key role of this literature

5. See also Ryan 1999:229-31.

in creating nationalisms, but that is another project. Nor have I considered popular music, especially calypso, as creator and vehicle for alternative narratives, the subject of a fascinating recent article by David Trotman.⁶

The Politics of Indigeneity

In virtually all accounts of Trinidad & Tobago's history, it is taken for granted that the nation has no indigenous population, that the aborigines – whether they were “Caribs” or “Arawaks,” both or neither – had disappeared by the nineteenth century and played no role in the islands' modern development. The literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth century pronounced the *absence* of the indigenes. Using the powerful tropes of extinction and amalgamation, writers of all persuasions saw the full-blooded Amerindian as entirely lacking in the nation's pluralist society and aboriginal culture as lost forever. As the anthropologist Maximilian Forte neatly puts it, the view was that “the only real Carib is a pure Carib, and the only pure Carib is a dead Carib” (Forte 2005:121, see also 111-32). The nation was seen as one of those states which were colonial creations, lacking any pre-European past, “modern” from the beginning of their colonial experience, and therefore lacking a primordial past on which to draw for images and symbols of nationalism. In this Trinidad & Tobago was different from Guyana and Suriname on the continental mainland, which both have significant Amerindian populations which have retained much of their cultures and languages (Eriksen 1992:142-44).

Since the early 1990s, mainly through the efforts of an organization based in Arima (an old town in northeastern Trinidad where surviving indigenes were concentrated in the late 1700s), the Santa Rosa Carib Community (SRCC), Trinidad & Tobago society has come to recognize the Amerindian/Carib as a valid symbol in nation-building and national identity politics. The result has been, in Forte's words (2005:133), “increased recognition of the Carib in narratives of national history.” To acknowledge the Amerindian presence helped to create “a sense of local primordality and of territorial continuity with antiquity.” The wider society has rediscovered its Carib heritage, and has accepted the “First People” (an internationally used term increasingly deployed by the SRCC) as the nation's territorial precursors and symbolic ancestors, even if not the biological ancestors of most modern Trinidadians. This is a development which, by restoring the indigenes to the national history, has given antiquity and chronological depth to the concept of the nation, symbolized by the now popular trope of the First People/Trinidadians. The Carib can also be seen as the first to struggle against colonialism. The shadowy figure of “Hyarima,” perhaps a Carib chief who fought the Spaniards

6. For imaginative literature, see Harney 1996, which, despite its title, deals exclusively with Trinidad & Tobago authors. For calypso, see Trotman 2007.

in the mid-seventeenth century, can be enshrined as a hero of resistance; a statue of him has been erected in Arima which bears a plaque calling him the first national hero of Trinidad. The tragic episode in 1699, when a group of Amerindians in the Spanish Capuchin Mission at Arena (now San Rafael) murdered the priests and then the governor and his suite, only to be hunted down and killed, or captured, tortured, and executed, can be reinterpreted as an epic of resistance to colonial rule and forced conversion, rather than the horrific murder of noble Catholic martyrs. A recent editorial in one of the nation's leading newspapers describes the site of this event as "the forest in Arena where 300 years ago, the First People of Trinidad made their last great stand against domination and injustice."⁷ The commemoration of 1992 (the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas) and 1998 (he sighted Trinidad and Tobago in 1498) also helped to fix the Amerindian/Carib as a central figure in the foundation of the national society.⁸

The SRCC has pursued the "invention of tradition" with considerable success since about 1990. "Traditional" festivals and practices connected to them, shamanistic ceremonies developed from several different sources – what Forte calls "global neo-shamanic transfers" – crafts, building techniques, healing practices, and food culture have all been revived, invented, and marketed as authentic Amerindian/Carib folkways. Moreover, the SRCC leaders have successfully forged international linkages with indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and South America (especially Guyana), in Canada and the United States, and globally, to strengthen the legitimacy of their identity as recognized aboriginal people. The use of "First Peoples/Nations" is a hallmark of this globalizing process, similar in many respects to the globalization of various "Diasporas" in recent years. The SRCC has also shrewdly developed strong links with the political elite, enjoying an especially close affiliation with the PNM, which is in power at the time of writing, but also with the two other parties which governed between 1986-1991 and 1995-2001. Partly for this reason, partly because the individuals who self-identify as Amerindian/Carib are very few numerically, partly precisely because of their status as indigenes, the people who were always here, the SRCC's activities and claims have not been seen as a threat either to the nationalist narrative, or to the ethnic projects whether Afrocentric or Indocentric. Certainly, however, they have succeeded in rewriting the Amerindian peoples into the national narrative of Trinidad (Tobago is only marginally part of their discourse). This success is reflected in a local newspaper editorial which recently declared "it's never too late to pay tribute to the First Peoples of the nation. They were the ones who had to

7. See the editorial in the *Trinidad Guardian*, September 23, 2006, p. 28.

8. De Verteuil 1995; Forte 2005:38, 133-42; Elie 2006; Norville 2007; *Trinidad Guardian* 2006, and the public lecture by P. Elie "The Arena 'Massacre': The Untold Story" given in Port of Spain, May 2007.

bear the brunt of the initial bruising encounter with an invading culture and the peoples decimated in the largest number and perhaps most brutal manner by the ‘discoverers’” (Forte 2005:181-97, 199-213, 224).⁹

The Tobago Narrative

Tobago’s territorial extent and, especially, its population are much smaller than Trinidad’s, to which it was united by imperial fiat in the late 1800s. It has always been marginal in the united colony’s and the independent nation’s economic and political development. The island was a separate British colony, with two brief periods of French rule, from 1763 to 1889, and this history as an “independent” colony, along with the geographical separation, lies behind the Tobago narrative. Very important, too, in creating a separate Tobago “ethnicity” (and therefore a separate narrative) is the fact that demographically and socially, the island is quite different from Trinidad. Tobago’s people are overwhelmingly of African descent, with small groups of local “Whites” and mixed-race individuals; the few Indians are quite recent arrivals from Trinidad. The poly-ethnic character of the larger island is not to be found in Tobago. Culturally, nearly everyone in Tobago is a Christian, the great majority Protestants (Anglicans, Methodists, Moravians, Pentecostals); the cultural mix is African-British, with virtually no influences from Spain or France, unlike Trinidad. Until recently, Tobago was a strongly rural, village-based, peasant society. Though this has changed rapidly over the last twenty years or so, the value systems and cultural forms which were created in the peasant villages remain the core of the Tobagonian sense of identity. And this identity, certainly in the second half of the twentieth century, was constructed largely in opposition to Trinidad, Tobago’s “Other” far more than British colonialism seems to be. The Tobago historical narrative is, not surprisingly, primarily a narrative of “Tobago and Trinidad” or “Tobago oppressed by Trinidad.” It has been constructed by prominent Tobago-born intellectuals and politicians, notably A.N.R. Robinson, first chairman of the Tobago House of Assembly (1980) and later both prime minister and then president of Trinidad & Tobago, and C.R. Ottley, civil servant and historian.¹⁰

The narrative begins in the seventeenth century, when Tobago was “fought over” (a favorite phrase) by several European powers attempting to

9. See also the editorial in the *Trinidad Guardian*, September 23, 2006, p. 28. For an interesting discussion of rather similar identity construction and claims by the present-day Jamaican Maroons, see Bilby 2006, especially pp. 411-16.

10. The generic “Tobago narrative” that follows is based on: Williams 1964:149-50; Ottley 1969, 1973; Robinson 1971:3-44, 1986:197-227, 242-43, 2004:41-51, 62-78, 313-17, 34-52; Premdas 1998:97-123; Ryan 1999:243-51; Luke 2006:248-66; R. Dumas, “Case for the Tobago Nation,” *Trinidad Guardian*, April 13, 2007, p. 23.

establish colonies there. It was considered a highly desirable prize, a “jewel”; major naval engagements were fought in its waters; it was a significant factor in Great Power international diplomacy. So fierce was the competition that eventually the powers agreed to leave it as a “neutral” island (1748). Once it was ceded to Britain in 1763, a period of rapid development followed. Sugar plantations were established, and the small island became a major producer of the most important Caribbean staple. Its great prosperity peaked in the 1790s and early 1800s, when the phrase “as rich as a Tobago planter” was proverbial in Britain. Perhaps surprisingly, the narrative tends to downplay the fact that this short-lived “prosperity” was based on the brutal enslavement of thousands of Africans. Soon after 1763, Tobago was granted colonial “self-government,” meaning a legislature which included an elected Assembly, whose members were voted for by white, landowning, Protestant men. It retained this “representative” form of government from 1768 to 1874 – at a time when Trinidad’s legislature had no elected members at all. Tobago, therefore, had been a rich island, fought over by the powers; it had enjoyed government by an elected legislature as a separate colony. These points constitute the foundation of the Tobago narrative.

Sugar production began to decline well before emancipation in the 1830s, but it was especially in the decades between the 1830s and the 1880s that the sugar estates collapsed, the result of mismanagement by impoverished British planters, neglect from the metropolitan government, and competition from other cane or beet producers. Tobago’s prosperity was over. She sank into the status of a wretchedly poor peasant island. Her elected Assembly was abolished by Britain and she became a mere crown colony (which Trinidad had always been). The “final humiliation” came in the 1880s and 1890s: she was “annexed” to Trinidad in two stages. The first stage (1889) was bearable because Tobago retained a subordinate legislature and some control over finance in the newly created Colony of Trinidad & Tobago. But the second (1899) was the crowning blow: she became a Ward (administrative district) of Trinidad & Tobago, with the same status as the other Wards in the larger island. And, as Robinson bitterly pointed out on many occasions, this was understood by virtually all Trinidadians as Tobago becoming a “ward” (inferior dependent) of Trinidad. (Even Williams, in his influential history, wrote that Tobago became a ward of Trinidad.)

After 1899, the narrative paints a picture of oppression and neglect, both from British colonialism, and from the legislature and elites in Trinidad. Tobago’s special needs were consistently ignored, the development of her infrastructure lagged decades behind Trinidad’s (no electricity until 1952, no secondary school until the 1920s), her farmers received no help, sea communications between the islands were grossly inadequate. Socially, Trinidadians regarded Tobagonians as country bumpkins, unsophisticated rustics; for a civil servant to be transferred to Tobago was a dreaded exile (or punishment).

The efforts of A.P.T. James, Tobago's elected representative in the Trinidad & Tobago legislature between 1946 and 1961, to champion his island's needs were ignored or treated with contempt. Both Ottley and (needless to say) Williams claimed that this period of abysmal neglect of Tobago ended with the first PNM government (1956-1961). Certainly the early PNM governments did make efforts to develop the island's infrastructure, especially after a devastating hurricane in 1963. But, in general, the narrative continues with neglect, oppression, and "spite politics" directed by the government against Tobagonians when they voted for Robinson's anti-PNM party in 1976. The campaign for a "devolved" or subordinate separate legislature for Tobago began, as an alternative to full-fledged secession; led by Robinson, it succeeded in 1980 with the establishment of the Tobago House of Assembly. A measure of self-government and representation had been "restored" to Tobago, though relations between the Tobago House of Assembly and the national government did not run smoothly.

The counterpart to the narrative of neglect and oppression by Trinidad is the eulogy to Tobago's traditional values and lifestyles, a core theme in expressions of island identity. Tobago was/is a village-based society, where face-to-face relationships, family or clan ties, village loyalties, and church affiliations matter far more than in urban, industrialized Trinidad. Strongly entrenched, "African" traditions of co-operation and self-help allowed impoverished peasants to survive and even prosper, albeit modestly. Land ownership was a core value; so was hard work, respect for elders, preachers and teachers, close ties to extended kin, active church membership. A proud peasant society made Tobagonians morally superior to the sophisticated, corrupt, clever "Trickydadians." This trope – nostalgic in many ways since the society on which the values system was based was rapidly disappearing in the late twentieth century – underpinned the claim to a separate "ethnic" identity. It also underpinned the Tobago narrative which challenged the Afro-Creole, essentially Trinidadian, hegemonic interpretation of the nation's past.¹¹

The Afrocentric Narrative

It was, perhaps, the Black Power movement of the late 1960s-1970s which first challenged the "orthodox" narrative and the Creole value system that supported it. In the political domain, its leaders accused Williams and the

11. For a rare critique of the Tobago narrative, see the Tobago-born intellectual Morgan Job (2005:88-90). He argues that the constant "harping on" about the nineteenth-century Assembly or Tobago's "independence" and "self-government" before union with Trinidad was historically false, because it was a "racist, unrepresentative, anti-African House of Assembly," and of no use to today's Tobagonians, victims (in his view) of poverty, AIDS, ignorance, and poor leadership.

PNM of being stooges of neocolonialism rather than heroes of the anticolonial struggle for independent nationhood. In the cultural domain, they complained that the PNM denigrated African elements in the creole mix, that the hegemonic culture was “Afro-Saxon” rather than African. The movement triggered a lively public discourse on values, ideology, and history (Eriksen 1992:177; Ryan 1999:229-31).

To create a full-fledged Afrocentric narrative of Trinidad & Tobago’s past presented peculiar difficulties which did not exist, say, in Jamaica. First, there was demography: people of African descent were no longer in the majority by the close of the last century; they were not even the single largest group (Africans and Indians each constitute around 40 percent of the national population). Second, the hegemonic Afro-Creole narrative did foreground the Creoles, the descendants of the slaves and the free Coloreds/Blacks, as the core of the national population and culture, even though it was a mixed sort of culture which was celebrated. Third, even the Tobago narrative, coming out of an island whose people are overwhelmingly African, was based on an insular rather than an ethnic identity, underpinned by a sense of Tobago uniqueness rather than negritude. Finally, unlike for example Suriname with its distinctive Maroon community whose culture remained strongly African, and whose unique sense of history and identity was forged in their successful military struggle against slavery and the colonial world, Trinidad does not have a past of heroic, violent slave rebellions. Despite these difficulties, we can observe the emergence of an Afrocentric narrative which makes claims distinct from those of the Afro-Creole one, notwithstanding many inevitable similarities.

This narrative sees slavery as the formative experience of the nation’s past, and stresses the brutality of the institution and the massive damage it wrought on the descendants of the enslaved up to the present. Of course, it rejects the French Creole myth that slave-owners were benign and paternalist and that the Trinidad experience was exceptional or special, just as Afrocentric writers have done, say, in Brazil and Curaçao. Far from being the basically contented and submissive subjects of benevolent masters, as the French Creole narrative had it, the enslaved struggled constantly against their subjugation. The enslaved were heroic rebels whose resistance, whether violent or by other modes, was the prototype for later national struggles after the end of slavery. The leaders of slave rebellions (where they could be identified) became the heroes of an epic story. Of course this has happened everywhere in the Caribbean and Brazil: Nanny of the Maroons and Sam Sharpe in Jamaica, Bussa in Barbados, Kofi in Guyana, the Surinamese Maroon leaders of the eighteenth century, Zumbi dos Palmares in Brazil have all undergone this transformation into national heroes. Sandy, the leader of a major slave uprising in Tobago in 1770, might be the closest equivalent for

Trinidad & Tobago, and Tobago, unlike the larger island, does have a history of several significant rebellions between 1770 and 1802.¹²

After the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, the Afrocentric narrative focuses on the struggles and sufferings of the emancipated people and their descendants. The ex-slaves received no land or other forms of compensation – their owners received a large sum of money from Britain as compensation for loss of property – and the local authorities did all they could to stop them from purchasing state-owned lands. An important aspect of the narrative is the idea that all the Indians received free grants of land on the expiry of their indentures, allowing them to become landowners while the Africans were given no grants and were prevented wherever possible from buying plots with their savings. (This is only partly true: the ex-indentureds received free grants of land for only a few years, 1869–1880, and most of the lands obtained by the Indians were purchased by them.) Partly through deliberate efforts by the imperial and local authorities, partly because of the massive psychological damage wrought by slavery, the narrative continues, Afro-Trinidadians entered the twentieth century still largely impoverished, landless, and barely educated.¹³

A major theme is the relentless effort of the colonial authorities to suppress African cultural and religious forms, and the equally relentless (and ultimately successful) resistance by the people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The focus here is on those forms which are more clearly “African” rather than “creole.” The heroic struggle of the Spiritual/Shouter Baptists against persecution resonates well with the Afrocentric narrative. This group, whose members have always been overwhelmingly Afro-Trinidadians, combined African beliefs and rituals with elements of Protestant (Baptist) faith. They were harassed by the authorities, stereotyped as adherents of Obeah (African sorcery) and devil worship. After 1917 the faith was criminalized through a law prohibiting any public Shouter worship, and though this was repealed in 1951, the colonial anti-Obeah laws were never repealed. Yet the Shouters, nearly all poor and lacking much formal education, struggled to defend and preserve their faith, and triumphed over adversity to become a large, “legitimate” religious denomination today. In the words of one of their leaders, “it took determination and strength on the part of Black people to see us through those days” (quoted in Ryan 1999:217). Perhaps even more than the Shouters,

12. Dos Santos Gomes 2001:77–82; Johnson 2003:15–16; 2007; Oostindie 2005:69, 159. For an interesting case study of how slavery has been “remembered” in modern Guyana, see Thompson 2006.

13. Morgan Job (2005:52–53, 67–68) claims that the “populist myth” that all Indians received grants of land, while Africans were denied this, fueled the PNM government’s distribution of state land to Afro-Trinidadian “farmers” after 1962, and the PNM’s “affirmative programme for Afro-Trinidadians” embarked on after 1970.

whose beliefs after all are essentially syncretic (and therefore “creole”), the Orisha faith is important to the Afrocentric narrative. This faith is derived from Yoruba religion, and though in Trinidad some Christian and Hindu elements crept in, it is far more clearly a “neo-African” religion than the Shouters. Even more than them, Orisha devotees were accused of practising Obeah, and several were convicted and jailed for this offence under the colonial laws; they were all stereotyped as devil worshippers and sorcerers. Their struggle to preserve the faith through persecution and contempt to attain its present-day legitimacy, according to a prominent (and high-profile) adherent, “represents the explicit articulation of this African religious presence in our land” (quoted in Ryan 1999:219). Some leaders, especially a few highly educated Afrocentric individuals who are now associated with the Orisha faith, believe it is time to purge its Christian and Hindu elements and to return to its original African “purity,” now that there is no need to hide or “mask” its beliefs and rituals (Ryan 1999:216-21).

In general, of course, this narrative celebrates everything in the national culture past or present which can be seen as African: drumming and African stick-fighting and related forms of song and dance; calypso which is claimed to be the direct descendant of West African song genres; and Canboulay and traditional types of carnival bands and performances rather than the modern Trinidad Carnival which is distinctly oriented now to the local middle classes and the tourists. The activists who have organized public celebrations of Emancipation Day over the last twenty years (the Emancipation Support Committee) have chosen to foreground a “Kanbule” procession as their main element, championing an African identity for the nation by using a putative Koongo (Congo) derivation and spelling of what is more usually rendered as “Canboulay.” (This was a noisy, torchlight procession of Afro-Trinidadian men, often featuring ritualized conflict between rival bands, which was staged on the Sunday night before Carnival Monday in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and was suppressed by the colonial authorities in 1881-1884.) The Afrocentric narrative rejects the trope of mixing and cultural fusion which is at the heart of the Afro-Creole one. The nationalist slogans of “all ah we is one,” or (to use the more formal English of the Jamaican national motto) “out of many, one people,” do not resonate well with this narrative; still less does Williams’s appeal that there should be no Mother Africa (or any other Mother). As with Afrocentric intellectuals in Brazil or Jamaica, the master narrative of mixture or metissage is replaced with one that puts Afro-Trinidadians and their cultural heritage firmly at the center of the national history (Sansone 2001:88-89; Johnson 2003:15-16).

Trinidad & Tobago does not yet have, in my view, a fully developed Afrocentric narrative, clearly distinguished from the hegemonic Afro-Creole one, though the elements for its construction are in place. No full-fledged Afrocentric history of the nation, comparable to that on Jamaica by Sherlock

and Bennett, has yet appeared. Nevertheless the main lines of the narrative have clearly entered the nation's public discourse. In its more extreme form, it can translate into overt hostility to claims for equality made by the other major ethnic group, Indo-Trinidadians. Thus the chairman of the National Association for the Empowerment of African People (a recently formed Trinidad & Tobago body) has stated, at a high-profile public function, "all the turmoil that we see in our society today not only represents a relentless struggle on the part of the East Indians to dominate the society; it also suggests that the agents of their group are prepared to utilise any means – be they legal, political, academic or religious – to achieve ethnic dominance that constitutes the essence of the conflict that we see in Trinidad and Tobago today." It should be noted that few, if any other Afrocentric thinkers in Trinidad & Tobago have publicly expressed such a view. It remains to be seen if the national commemoration of the abolition of the British transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, in 2007, will push the development of a specifically Afrocentric narrative of the nation; at the time of writing (June 2007), there is some indication that it will (Sherlock & Bennett 1998).¹⁴

The emerging Afrocentric discourse has certainly not escaped criticism. As far back as the 1970s, Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott (who lived in Trinidad at that time) wrote a powerful critique of the tendency for "servitude to the muse of history" to produce a literature "of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves," or a futile search for "songs of triumph, the defiance of the captured warrior, the nostalgic battle chants and ... the great African pastoral" (Walcott 1998:46). Walcott (1998:54) observed, surely thinking of Trinidad & Tobago, "because we think of tradition as history, one group of anatomists claims that this tradition is wholly African and that its responses are alerted through the nostalgia of one race," refusing to allow those of Asian (or other) ancestry the "same fiction." More recently, at least one Trinidadian newspaper columnist writing in 1989-1990, who seemed to speak for the small local "white" community, Jennifer Franco (quoted in Siewah 1994:703-6), frequently expressed her dismay at Afrocentric claims of "the longer presence here, the more meaningful contribution, the greater suffering," and hence greater "rights" to the nation. "We have listened, and listened and listened to the story of the struggle of the Africans," she complained; it was time to hear other narratives, including that of the white Creoles. Another trenchant critique of the

14. For the statement by Selwyn Cudjoe, chairman of NAEAP, see the *Sunday Express* (Trinidad), August 6, 2006, p. 7, and for commentary on it by Selwyn Ryan, see the *Sunday Express*, August 13, 2006, p. 11. For developments linked to the 2007 bicentennial, see Caribbean Historical Society 2007 and the public lecture "The Meaning of Freedom" by J. Campbell at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad, March 2007: both present an Afrocentric narrative of Trinidad & Tobago/Caribbean history.

Afrocentric narrative has been the Afro-Tobagonian Morgan Job. And, needless to say, spokesmen for the emerging Indocentric narrative have attacked many of its elements both explicitly and implicitly as they constructed their own national epic (Siewah 1994:236-67, 295-96, 703-6; Walcott 1998:37-54, 10; Job 2005:52-53, 67-68).

The Indocentric Narrative

Trinidadians of South Asian descent now constitute some 40 percent of the national population and are marginally more numerous than Afro-Trinidadians, according to the last census. Their ancestors arrived between 1845 and 1917 as indentured laborers to “replace” the former slaves who, for the most part, rejected field labor on the sugar estates for very low wages as a viable option for free people. Gradually a small but growing group of educated, middle-class Indo-Trinidadians emerged and began to articulate an Indian view of the colony’s development; certainly by the 1950s, a few such men were explicitly challenging the Afro-Creole, PNM-dominated narrative. H.P. Singh, in his several pamphlets published around the time of national independence, was probably the most trenchant of this group. But it was particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century that a full-fledged Indocentric narrative emerged. The spread of education had produced a far larger group of highly qualified Indo-Trinidadians than before, many of them well established in the prestigious professions; their economic success, as landowners, businessmen, and entrepreneurs, gave them considerable financial clout. Political leaders and parties associated mainly with Indians became increasingly viable in the 1980s-1990s. These developments formed the background for a process of ethnic revitalization from the 1970s, which in turn fed a parallel “Hindu renaissance” in the same period. As Indo-Trinidadians in fact became more and more “creolized” in their cultural practices, anxiety about a loss of ancestral traditions, and possible dilution of “racial purity,” tended to increase. Moreover, the Black Power movement of the late 1960s/early 1970s further galvanized ethnic revitalization. Most Indo-Trinidadians opposed the movement and rejected the label “black,” which, most felt, subsumed their ethnic identity under a blanket term always primarily associated with people of African descent. It seems clear that the rediscovery of African roots associated with Black Power stimulated a similar process among the Indians.

Gradually a fairly clear Indocentric narrative of the nation’s past emerged. In one version, probably the dominant one, the story was that of all Indo-Trinidadians, regardless of religion; for it should be noted that although most Indians are Hindus, significant numbers of them adhere to Christianity or Islam. A second version might more properly be called a Hinducentric narrative, which stridently associates “Indianness” with Hinduism. Of course this

has been influenced by the growing strength, and high international profile, of right-wing Hindu organizations in India. The premise of the Hinducentric narrative is well summed up by one of its leading spokesmen, Surendranath Capildeo, when he stated in 1989 (quoted in Siewah 1994:226) “Hindu religion is the substance of Indian culture and Indian culture is the form of Hindu religion.” As Selwyn Ryan has put it, the more extreme version sees the triumph of Hindu civilization in Trinidad (maybe not in Tobago!) as inevitable because of its inherent superiority to all others; Hindu hegemony is karmic. It seems fair to say, however, that less extreme and more inclusive versions constitute (at present) the mainstream Indocentric narrative (Ryan 1999:257-58; Siewah 1994:226).

This narrative begins with the period of indentured immigration (1845-1917).¹⁵ It insists that the vast majority of the immigrants were deceived, tricked, or forced to offer themselves to the *arkatis* (recruiters) in India, not volunteers (for, unlike the slave trade, indentured immigration was in principle a voluntary process with fairly elaborate provisions for ensuring that this was so). Some were gullible and were tricked, some were persuaded through false promises, some were the victims of outright kidnapping, or so the narrative goes. Clem Seecharan (1997:xxiii) has found the same narrative in his native Guyana, what he calls “morose accounts of deception and separation which still claim local [Guyanese] Indian emotions,” rather than acknowledgement of the hard reality that – though fraud and force must have played a part in many individual cases – the vast majority left to escape extreme poverty, landlessness, debts, caste and gender oppression, collapse of indigenous industry, and personal or family troubles. Once the immigrants boarded the ships, whatever the paths that took them to the “Coolie Depot” in Calcutta, the narrative paints a picture of horrific suffering on the long voyage across the *kali pani* (dark water) to Trinidad. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, conditions on the journey are described in terms reminiscent of the Middle Passage – a comparison which, except on a very few voyages when shipboard epidemics devastated the passengers, can hardly be supported by empirical evidence.¹⁶

15. The generic “Indocentric narrative” which follows is based on: Eriksen 1992:129-39; Singh 1993:18, 89-90, 98; Siewah 1994:224-68, 298-307; Seecharan 1997:xxiii-iv, 27, 31, 60; Ryan 1999:7, 202, 211-13, 227-29, 257-58; Persad 2000; Figueira 2003:42-44, 159-60, 167, 188-99. A good brief summary of the narrative can be found in K. Mahabir, “Indian Arrival Day,” *Sunday Guardian* (Trinidad), May 27, 2007, p. 25. Each Indian Arrival Day (May 30, commemorating the first group of Indians to arrive in Trinidad in 1845) produces many similar articles in the national newspapers. It has been a public holiday since 1995, when the 150th anniversary was celebrated.

16. For a recent fictional account of the *arkatis* and the horrors of the voyage, see the Indo-Trinidadian author Ron Ramdin (2004).

Once arrived on the plantations to serve out their indentures, the narrative continues, the immigrants faced appalling conditions of working and living, “unremitting oppression, moral degradation and despair,” as Seecharan (1997:60) sums up the Guyanese version, which he describes as simplistic and half-true at best. The indentureds worked long hours on the estates, for minimal wages, bullied and harassed by the managers and supervisors, the victims of elaborate rules and regulations which saw many of them jailed for trivial offences, like brief absences from work. As Simbhoonath Capildeo put it, in a 1957 speech in the local legislature (quoted in Figueira 2003:42-44, 167): “The poor East Indian labourers on the estates are the victims of over 100 years of suppression, oppression, and aggression ... people whose blood is in Trinidad’s soil, who have been transported from their homeland to work under subhuman conditions.” The son of an indentured immigrant himself (albeit a Brahmin and a pundit), Capildeo said in 1962, “I think that no finer men were forced to do more heinous labour than people who had to go and do indentured labour on the sugar estates” (quoted in Figueira 2003:42-44, 167). The narrative of recruitment by fraud or force, a horrific voyage, and unrelieved oppression on the Trinidad estates, is well captured in a recent video by the local journalist Gideon Hanoomansingh, *Legacy of Our Ancestors*.¹⁷

Again an implicit comparison with the hardships of the enslaved can easily be detected here, and an element in the Afrocentric and Indocentric narratives is the issue of “who suffered most,” what Seymour Drescher (in another context) describes as “competitive victimization.” At its extreme this kind of argument has led, mainly in the United States, to futile attempts to “equate” the slave trade and slavery with the Nazi Holocaust, as if one could ever establish “a hierarchy of collective suffering or radical evil” (Drescher 2001:112; see also Drescher 1999:312-38). In the Trinidad case, competitive claims to ancestral agonies might be put forward. In the late 1990s, Hindu spokesmen rejected claims for “reparations” for African slavery, arguing that indentureship was just as damaging and brutal as slavery and that, if anything, its victims suffered more – but Indo-Trinidadians did not use this past ordeal as an “excuse” for present failures, as (it was implied) Afro-Trinidadians did. As Ryan (1999:223-29) correctly observes, this claim of equal or even greater “suffering” was “a polemical statement which had no basis in historical fact, but was part of a deliberate plan on the part of the Maha Sabha [Trinidad’s leading Hindu organization] to rewrite Trinidad’s history” to serve its wider agenda. Interestingly, the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), a long-established moderately Afrocentric organization, recently claimed: “In actu-

17. The video *Legacy of Our Ancestors: The Indian Presence in Trinidad and Tobago 1845-1917*, by Gideon Hanoomansingh, was made in 2003 and has been shown several times on national television.

ality, there was little – if any – difference between slavery and indentureship. There was the same inhumane conditions on the ships, leading to the deaths of thousands at sea. The East Indian labourer experienced the same kind of physical brutality as the slaves. Penalties for shunning work were floggings ... and even the loss of parts of the body.” This kind of claim, which one might expect as part of the Indocentric narrative, and which has very little basis in empirical evidence, is perhaps surprising granted the nature of NJAC; yet this organization has always stressed its “national” mission and has tried ever since 1970, when it led the Black Power movement, to involve Indo-Trinidadians. The statement may be understood as a well-intentioned (though unhistorical) polemical device to stress the commonalities and “equality” of the nation’s two largest ethnic groups.¹⁸

Despite the sufferings of the indentureds, the narrative continues, they endured and overcame all the hardships, and through their discipline and hard work, they “saved” the local sugar industry which might have collapsed if it had continued to depend on scarce and unreliable labor from the Creoles. In a wider sense, they also “saved” the whole agrarian economy of Trinidad, by their labor on the sugar, cocoa, and coconut estates, and (even more importantly) by their establishment of a thriving peasant sector. Their “innate” love of the land, their culturally determined propensity for landownership and agriculture, created a sturdy independent small farming class, growing canes, rice, and a whole range of food crops, as well as raising livestock for milk and meat. Indians made a tremendous contribution to Trinidad’s economic development in these ways. “They have contributed more than any other group to the economic development of the country,” stated H.P. Singh in 1962, “yet they are treated as pariahs” (Singh 1993:18). Moreover, Indians achieved their successes in agriculture (and business) on their own: the idea that all Indians received free grants of land after their indentures were up was firmly (and correctly) rejected. As the Maha Sabha stated in 1998 (quoted in Ryan 1999:74), “It is not government grants or State patronage which sustained the Maha Sabha and the Hindu community. That Indian immigrants were given land in lieu of a passage back to India has wrongly influenced the thinking of many opinion leaders in Trinidad.”

In 1917, indentured immigration to Trinidad ended, and at the start of 1920, the few remaining indentured workers had their contracts cancelled. The Indocentric narrative continues with a story of more persecution and discrimination, and further triumphs. Indians were oppressed by the colonial authorities, by Christian missionaries who attacked Hinduism and Islam and used unfair means to secure conversions, and, increasingly as the period of decolonization got underway, by the Creoles who were beginning to domi-

18. See the untitled article by the National Joint Action Committee (Trinidad & Tobago) in the *Sunday Guardian* (Trinidad), May 21, 2006, p. 24.

nate the civil service and government. There was discrimination against them. No state funds were given to Hindu schools until the late 1940s. Traditional Hindu marriages were illegal until 1945; because pundits were not up to then recognized as civil marriage officers, couples marrying under religious rites would need to carry out a separate registration exercise to make the union legal. Few did, and as a result the vast majority of Hindu children were technically illegitimate, often to their disadvantage when propertied parents died intestate, as most did. In 1999 the Maha Sabha called for reparations of up to two billion (local) dollars for the property losses suffered by generations of Hindu (and Muslim) Indians in this way. (Interestingly, the Indo-Trinidadian and Hindu prime minister then in power dismissed this call as “foolishness,” though a few Indocentric commentators took the call seriously.) Yet, despite the discrimination and oppression, despite the contempt of other Trinidadians who saw them as heathen coolies, Indo-Trinidadians continued to endure and rise in the socio-economic scale. Through hard work, discipline, frugality (at times to excess), strong family support, faith in their ancestral religions, and a commitment to deferred gratification in the interest of the next generation, Indians achieved success in farming, business, education, and the professions. And all this on their own, without the benefit of handouts, government patronage, or any favors. “No power on earth can stop the onward march of a frugal, hard-working and industrious people,” wrote H.P. Singh in 1965, and certainly not the resentment of the “Negroes” when they saw Indians “forgetting their place,” leaving the cane fields and “climbing ever higher” (Singh 1993:89-91; Ryan 1999:202, 227-28).

With the accession to power of the PNM in 1956, and independence in 1962, Indo-Trinidadians found oppression by the African-dominated PNM governments had replaced that by the British colonialists – only more so. Discrimination was the order of the day. The state handed out its favors to its own clients, not to people who generally voted for opposition parties. Fundamentalist Christian missionaries, mostly from the United States (or locals trained there), launched crude and aggressive assaults on Hinduism, devil or idol worship in their worldview. Yet Indo-Trinidadians outstripped all others in education and in the professions, and also did well in business. Political power continued to elude them, until in 1995 an epochal event occurred: a party based on Indian voters, and led by a Hindu Trinidadian, Basdeo Panday, was able to form the government through the support of the two Tobago MPs. Not surprisingly, this event triggered off a triumphalist discourse among most (certainly not all) Indo-Trinidadians. One can say that it marked a fitting climax to the Indocentric narrative of Trinidad & Tobago history.

As we have already noted, a more extreme kind of Hinducentric narrative has also developed, especially in the last fifteen or twenty years. Perhaps its classic expression was a public lecture delivered in 1989 by Surendranath

Capildeo, an attorney, politician, and scion of Trinidad's most prominent Brahmin Hindu clan. He told his audience,

We [Indians] are like no other race. We are different. Indians are a world unto themselves. We regard ourselves as the eternal people. Our religion is the eternal religion. We have been, and are witness to, a continuous unbroken thread of Indian civilization, which began before the memory of man ... So when you look at an Indian, in Trinidad, or wherever, you just remember that. An Indian is no ordinary being. He belongs to a special race ... The Indian mind does not submit to slavery. You cannot enslave an Indian mind. Not even the Vedic gods of yore could do that. That is our legacy. That is our heritage. (Quoted in Siewah 1994:238-39)

After this remarkable opening, with its coded reference to others who did "submit to slavery," Capildeo went on to present a full-fledged, albeit extreme version of the Indocentric narrative: the horrors of the voyage, oppression on the sugar estates, Indian success in agriculture and education, the triumphs of the Capildeo dynasty (which includes Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul), the Indian/Hindu revitalization of the past decades after all the persecution from the "system of political negritude" which began with the PNM victory in 1956. All in all, Indians "had not only rescued Trinidad in no uncertain manner, but had laid the foundation for its transition into a modern, model nation state." And what would happen to that nation if Indians suddenly disappeared or stopped doing what they did? "Law and order will collapse. Bankruptcy will be the norm. Starvation will be your daily wage. Life here will cease." But given the chance, "the Indian community will take this country to heights unimagined ... The Indians have the capacity to feed, clothe, educate and maintain the people of this country, and to do it in style, comfort and ease" (Siewah 1994:259).¹⁹ This kind of triumphalist narrative – partly no doubt a type of rhetorical excess which is locally called "robber talk" after a traditional carnival character – is not part of the mainstream, public Indo-Trinidadian worldview, but its expression from time to time naturally feeds into Afro-Trinidadian anxieties, and encourages a more radical Afrocentric narrative in its turn.

In addition to the four counternarratives I have discussed here, one recognizes that the smaller immigrant groups, such as the Chinese, Syrian/Lebanese, and Portuguese, might also be developing their own, and the local Whites might construct a sort of updated version of the old French Creole one. The Chinese-descended community has traditionally maintained a low profile in Trinidad & Tobago, preferring not to take public positions or stake ethnic claims, but high-profile, and highly successful, celebrations organized

19. See also S. Capildeo, "The Stench of Hindu Shame," *Daily Express* (Trinidad), April 17, 2007, p. 11.

in October 2006 to mark the bicentenary of the first arrival of Chinese immigrants might change this. Two books were published to commemorate the event, and a program of lectures, art and photography exhibitions, cultural performances, “dragon boat” races, and so on was organized over several months, culminating on the actual anniversary date in October. Meanwhile, a few prominent local Syrian/Lebanese clans have published books on their family history and on their ethnic associations.

The development of the Afro-Creole “master narrative” during the Independence period, and the subsequent emergence of ethnic or regional counternarratives from the 1970s onwards, have had the effect of suppressing or eclipsing an earlier, class-based interpretation of the nation’s history. Such a narrative, associated especially with the country’s emerging labor movement, and with left-wing writers generally, began to take shape during the interwar years, and stressed cross-race alliances of the workers and the “progressive” middle stratum to achieve gains for the broad masses and to push for decolonization. In the same way that labor and socialist movements were deflected or even defeated by the rise of the PNM in the mid-1950s, so the line of historical narrative associated with them was eclipsed by the Afro-Creole master narrative. The class-based narrative remains significant in formal history writing, however, and may in the future achieve more public resonance than it has now. And a “gendered” narrative has certainly developed in the academic historiography of Trinidad & Tobago, if not yet, perhaps, in the popular mind.²⁰

Though these potential narratives are not likely to have the same emotional or political resonance as the four I have considered, especially the Afrocentric and Indocentric ones, their possible emergence points to one salient fact: There are now many “authorized versions” of the country’s past, all competing for inclusion in the canonical national history. The past is very much alive and a key arena for contestation in the complicated, dynamic, poly-ethnic society that is Trinidad & Tobago today.

20. Rennie 1973, Singh 1994, Reddock 1994, Mohammed 2003.

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