

Book Review

Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs – (Post) Colonial Representations of Aboriginality in Trinidad and Tobago, by Maximilian C. Forte, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005; 283 pages (hardcopy) ISBN 0-8130-2828-0.

Since the 1990s there has been much published literature about the contemporary indigenous peoples of the Caribbean to put to rest the myth of their extinction. Examples include Forte (2006), Honychurch (2000), Palacio (1995), and Vinding (2003). For additional and current information see the electronic sources, Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink at www.centrelink.org and the Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology at www.kacike.org. On the other hand, there remain questions popularly asked about these indigenous peoples. Examples include – Who are they? How did they escape extinction? How are they keeping alive their identity? What do they look like? How are they interfacing with their co-citizens after political independence in their small nation-states? These are some of the questions that Max Forte attempts to unravel in his 2006 volume “Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs – (Post)Colonial representations of aboriginality in Trinidad and Tobago”.

Briefly the book is about the Caribs of Arima, who make up a very small proportion of the 24,112 population (1980 census) living in the Arima Borough subregion in north-east Trinidad. Forte traces how they revived their cultural identity, especially since the 1990s when the Santa Rosa Carib Community (SRCC), the main vehicle of community mobilisation, adopted a

decidedly revivalist indigenous agenda. Beforehand, the SRCC had focused its attention on a few ceremonies handed through oral tradition extending as far back as the 1700s, before Britain captured Trinidad from Spain. The personification of this tradition rested on the Queen, a position held in certain families, who presided over parades and other ceremonies held to celebrate the feast of Santa Rosa on August 1. From organising the annual celebration, the SRCC moved to proactively integrate aspects of Carib culture, considerably augmenting their own material and non-material inventory and further consolidating a greater validation of their indigenous origins. Additionally, they made use of historical archives that supported statements about their cultural authenticity.

The retrieval programme of the SRCC received much support from sources extending from the immediate community to the far reaches of the globe. Some came from the Arima Borough Council, their local government, which saw them as living links to a heritage that could contribute to the public self-esteem of its constituents as well as to economic benefits through an incipient tourism market. The national government saw the SRCC as materialisation of its own grounding in territorial antiquity or as Forte says, 'the indigenous anchor of a state in search of a nation' (p.133). To undertake several of its programmes the SRCC received technical, financial and moral support from their local and central governments.

Simultaneously, the SRCC strategically networked with individuals and groups representing indigenous peoples' organisations from the larger Caribbean and the rest of the Western Hemisphere. Such recognition coincided with the 1990s global recognition of the indigenous peoples' movement by the United Nations, the Organisation of the American States, and other multilateral agencies, associated with the Quincentenary of Columbus in 1992, the UN Declared Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 and the subsequent UN Declared Decade of Indigenous Peoples, 1995-2004.

The capacity to paint from multiple pieces a holistic picture in the metamorphosis of a community organization from being a centre of folklorist interest to becoming an agent of reflective revitalisation comes from the author's expertise in ethnography, the field craft of social anthropologists. From 1995 to 2000 he spent periods in the field and subsequently did successive visits collecting data. Additionally, he included in his workload multiple tasks at the request of the SRCC and its members. He also engaged members of the SRCC in such projects as working on the organisation's

webpage, which provided him with an additional perspective on their programme platform. He enrolled at the UWI campus in St. Augustine, Trinidad widening his connection within the larger academic community of the country. The duration and intensity of his field experience made him feel at home in the community, to which he acquired a family link by marrying a member.

To complement his field experience he acquired access to volumes of archival information on the history of the Eastern Caribbean, and particularly Trinidad and Tobago. He read much archival material from the local press, while following up the media in its contemporary coverage of Arima. He accessed information from the vibrant Trinidad and Tobago intellectual community together with several others who studied the Eastern Caribbean. Forte displays an abiding interest in things Trinidadian within both the humanities and the social sciences, clearly demonstrating the wholistic influence of Caribbeanists like Peter Hulme and Neil Whitehead (see Hulme and Whitehead (eds. 1992).

Forte is at his best in wrapping his field data within his theoretical perspective, which covers three parameters – structure and agency, representation vs. material reality, and transactions as the pivotal function of given brokers. Within a region where the structural-functional paradigm remains the mode of explaining human phenomena, Forte uses structure only as a backdrop where persons (i.e. agents) are bringing about specific ends. The activity of the agent is best understood as he interprets representations, while not focusing on the materiality of objects. Finally, representation occurs as brokers negotiate transactions to improve on their well-being. Structure, symbolism and transactions become the three main axes of Forte's theoretical approach to his monograph.

Without a shadow of any doubt the Caribbean region has contributed a great deal to world culture relative to its geographical size. Probably because the wealth of this contribution has been in artistic expression through music, dance, drama, literature, and sports, there is a tendency within the region to equate culture with the expressive arts. Forte's main contribution is to re-introduce an anthropological discourse to the topic of culture in the region as basically a form of learned behaviour that remains within the heads and hands of community members. In this regard, culture is not a concept, that scholars periodically pick up from their book shelf, wipe the dust from it, and then subject it to their treatise. Forte shows that along

with being a concept culture is also a process that may be articulated by the mass media, manipulated by people at all levels of the society, and incorporated into public programmes as national policy. Honychurch (2000: 224) makes a similar assertion about his own ethnography identifying his work as not on 'culture *per se*' but 'about culture as a means to an end'.

The function of the ethnographer is to document how culture is manifested and used. To Forte, the focus is on the representations that people form about their culture; and more specifically in this monograph, it is about cultural identity, a topic that receives much ventilation throughout the Caribbean. Within the region the prevailing axis in both scholarly as well as non-scholarly thinking about cultural identity is on (a) its source and (b) the degree of blending in the elements that has taken place (or assumed to deviate from an ideal pedigree). By and large the sources spotlighted have been from the Old World – mainly Britain, Africa, and India. In his study, Forte has cemented the native peoples of the Caribbean as another to the traditionally acknowledged sources. To accommodate the wide range of representations that Forte encountered in the field he opted to use the term 'indigeneity' as against the normal, but often misunderstood term 'indigenous'. The bulk of the book is on how the SRCC members use the wide range of influences impacting on them to adjust (that is, re-engineer) their indigeneity, consciously progressing toward their roots.

My critique of the book comes from the organisation of its format. The text starts with a page entitled 'Introduction', which was not within the chapter series. Insofar as an introduction is an essential part of the content, it should have been inserted as Chapter 1. Furthermore, the author did not use the traditional format of introduction, body, and conclusion for his chapters, opting to be eclectic in his method of organization. However, many times it was difficult to discern how he was actually organising each chapter. Although his content focused on process, which has its own dynamism, yet it is incumbent on the author to provide a more discernible structure for his text. My impression was that his narrative was too textured to fit within the flat, unilinear medium of print. Indeed, in reading the book I kept seeing clips of streaming video, rushing to compete with my understanding of the text. In not adequately fitting the content within the conventional book format, he ended up repeating some words in chapters and their subheadings. The result was that one has to read over some chapters and their subheadings a few times to grasp their meaning. Compounding this is the author's

intermittent use of long, complex sentences, with repetitive modifying phrases.

The book is of special interest to students of social anthropology and history. It is helpful to students of public policy, particularly its articulation at the levels of the community, local government, and central government. Students of community-based organisations, a field that has remained in the applied projects of NGOs within the region, will appreciate the description of the membership of the SRCC as well as its organisation and programme implementation. Additionally, the spotlight is on an urban community-based organisation as opposed to the more often concern with rural community groups in the literature. The SRCC can see a reflection of itself, one originating to a large extent from their input. Finally, people throughout the Caribbean, with or without indigenous origin, can learn a great deal about their own history and contemporary life.

References

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