Narratives of Development
An Anthropological Investigation into Narratives as a Source of Enquiry in Development Planning

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ABSTRACT: The Chaguanas Borough Corporation in Trinidad and Tobago is currently the fastest-growing borough where economic development is complemented by investment in residential, commercial and infrastructural programmes. In tandem with the local government, an inter-governmental organisation (IGO) sought to understand the sociohistorical context within which economic growth has taken place to inform the IGO's development plans for the area. This article focuses on local narratives collected in 2013 as part of a historical case study that reveals a complex relationship of citizens to the state within the context of a post-colonial, multi-ethnic society. Using an interpretivist framework of narratives as language, metaphor and knowledge, I examine how narratives reflect the lived experience of economic development as a confluence of history, ethnic identity and neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurship. Their inclusion as a source of enquiry in development planning will ensure that exogenous intervention remains holistic, equitable and informed by historical institutions of social practice.

KEYWORDS: economic development, interpretation, knowledge, language, metaphor, narrative analysis, Trinidad and Tobago

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, the Chaguanas Borough Corporation (CBC) in Trinidad and Tobago (TT) became the focal point of an inter-governmental organisation (IGO) project to promote local economic development as part of a broader Caribbean initiative. The rapid expansion of the borough, both demographically and economically, over the past thirty years has drawn the attention of the central and local government as well as international players like the IGO that are keen to make an example of it for future development projects. In order fully to apprehend the context within which economic growth has taken place, the IGO hired me to do a five-week study of the historical, social and economic factors that have contributed to CBC’s success story so far. My findings would inform project plans going forward. I chose to include local narratives in my final report in order to present a holistic picture of how people understood economic development, to whom or to what they attributed the phenomenon, and how they made sense of it in their everyday lives. My aim, in short, was to examine the social underpinnings of local development; it was an exercise to keep ‘the individual’ front and centre in the analysis of economic growth.

This article takes an in-depth look at some of the narratives I amassed during the course of the project. Within the context of a post-colonial, multi-ethnic society such as TT, development in thought and practice is a complex negotiation of plantation history, ethnicity and the neoliberal agenda of the state. Through a framework of analysis that examines narratives as language, metaphor and knowledge, this paper delves into this complex relationship as experienced by private citizens and public officials working in the
borough. I contend that for development practitioners in TT, project planning must be informed by narrative analysis as narratives reflect the lived experiences of a community and, importantly, reveal discursive patterns of social discrimination and inclusion that can affect implementation of development projects going forward.

Theorising Narratives

Narratives are characterised as coherent plots that have an ‘inherent integrity’ determined by a beginning, middle and end (Dodge et al. 2005: 296). Whether textual or oral, narratives are organised around ‘events’ or a ‘change of state’ (Hühn 2013). Events give narratives a temporal dimension that manifests in a ‘before’ and ‘after’ sequencing of occurrences. Narratives, through their characters and events organised in space and time, ‘make sense’ in their totality (Toolan 2013). Santander (2006: 1) notes that ‘while narratives do not intend to prevail over each other, a discourse will attempt to regulate meaning under the façade of claimed objectivity’. Validity is of secondary concern in narrativisation. A narrative can be a fictional or non-fictional account of events; what is more important is the ‘tellability’ of narratives, or their ‘noteworthiness’ (Baroni 2014). In this regard, Ettema and Glassner allude to the ability of narratives to transform ‘the real into an object of desire through a formal coherence and a moral order that the real lacks’ (1989: 258). Coherence in narratives presumes the existence of ‘sufficient overt or covert clues for the reader to see links, … see a point …’ (Toolan 2013), unlike other forms of speech activity where information can be relayed or reported without having to conform to an overarching story structure set in time.

Narrativisation is a highly reflective practice that is made visible not only through the particularity of how events are ordered and narrated, but also simply through the act of narrating. Narratives are anchored in the human experience, making subject creation – in its various avatars – a natural byproduct of the process (Ospina and Dodge 2005: 145). The act of narrating renders a dialectic between the narrator and the narration – she or he shapes and is shaped by the story he or she narrates. Understanding the relationship between the narrator and his or her story demands attention to narratives as objects of analysis themselves. An exercise in narrative enquiry shifts focus from the genesis to the interpretation of what is being said. The emphasis is ‘less about predicting or generalizing behaviour, and more about interpreting intention and meaning in context’ (Dodge et al. 2005: 289; see also Lin 1998).

Within the realm of development, acknowledging the interplay of fact and intent as visible in narratives can have far-reaching consequences. In his examination of ‘sticky’ development narratives, Roe warns us that ‘when one story more than any other becomes the way we best articulate our “real” feelings or make sense of the uncertainties and ambiguities around and in us, then the force of the narrative in question becomes compelling’ (1991: 296). Why some narratives persist over others can shed light on both institutional underpinnings and individual subjectivities that manifest through storytelling. Within development work, the messiness of a community’s sociocultural sensibilities has often been subjected to an exercise of simplification and standardisation within an economic framework of deliverables (Scott 1998). This contributes to project implementation failures as one size does not fit all (see also Bebbington 2005; Mohan 2007; Roe 1991). In order to adjust project planning and implementation to reflect local realities, ‘blueprint development’ should be re-examined to reflect ‘how to make the best of what we already have, meager and troubling as it often is’ (Roe 1991: 296).

This article focuses on narratives as objects of analysis that open a window into the local realities to which Roe (1991, 1994) alludes. The framework of narrative enquiry put forward by Dodge et al. (2005) allows me creatively to combine scholarship across public administration and anthropology on interpretivism, identity construction and policy analysis to examine the import of narrative enquiry in development planning. Narrative enquiry, according to the authors, can be conducted across three axes of interpretation: language, metaphor and knowledge. The linguistic analysis of narratives emphasises that such stories convey meanings rooted in ‘social reality rather than an “objective” reality’ (ibid.: 290). My focus here will be on the words used within narratives that reflect how economic growth is talked about by different people and groups – the what rather than the why. Narratives can also be explored as metaphors or hidden transcripts of institutional structures and social practices. Narratives as metaphors reveal how people make sense of their social world by constructing and deconstructing available discourses and texts to fit their worldview (Gergen 1985). Unlike linguistic analysis, their metaphorical value is really in the study of ‘invisible meanings embedded in institutional life’ (Dodge et al. 2005: 293). Peacock and Holland (1993: 371) suggest that such narratives reflect the psychocultural element of self-formation through the reten-
tion and perpetuation of culturally constructed narratives. In the process of active selection and creation, a narrative interpolates the narrator as a subject of that social order; it exposes the narrator’s historical positionality in the grand scheme of things (see also Boyer 2000).

Narrativisation is also an exercise in the production of social knowledge based on experience. This perspective emphasises the ‘formative value of stories and the importance of crafting and telling stories from experience’ (Dodge et al. 2005: 290; see also Bruner 1986), thus giving importance to lived experience in storytelling. According to Bonta, narratives not only provide stories and backgrounds to events but through the medium of the self allow the narrator to convey a certain attitude and meaning coloured by his or her own perspective (2011: 350). As such, narratives are epistemological vehicles for knowing about the world, one unique narrator at a time. Together, these three approaches give me a useful framework within which to examine narratives that converge around an explanation of economic development in CBC.

Locating the Narratives

TT is a twin-island Caribbean nation-state that was colonised by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. In 1802, the island officially switched hands from the Spanish to the British Crown, and by the nineteenth century, TT had a full-fledged plantation economy supported by African slaves brought in by English colonisers. During British rule, TT experienced segregation along three racial categories: whites, browns (mixed European and African descent) and blacks (African descent) (Crichlow 1998: 66). In spite of the influx of East Indian indentured labourers from 1845 to 1917, the existing social hierarchy did not see any major reshuffle as East Indians were relegated to a position outside this ideological framework. One reason might be that when manumitted slaves found themselves being replaced by East Indian labourers, the latter were already stigmatised as an ethnic group that would be satisfied with ‘a low standard of living, manual drudgery, seasonal underemployment and wasted labour, and unfair and ill treatment’ (Ramesar 1976: 13); segregation and derogation of this population was a direct result of their association with agricultural labour.

In 1962, the country gained its independence and elected an Afro-Trinidadian, Dr Eric Williams of the People’s National Movement (PNM), as the country’s first Prime Minister. Williams held this office for the next twenty-five years during which time ‘the state apparatus became the instrument for the preservation of an iniquitous social order upon which political power was based’ (Hintzen 1989: 180). Like his colonial predecessors, Williams’ actions reaffirmed the supreme authority of the central administration across all socioeconomic strata of the free nation. The status quo of state-based patronage and management was largely maintained even under the auspices of new political parties like the National Alliance for Reconstruction, the United National Congress and the People’s Partnership. Local governments have remained administratively and financially weak, and the central government holds the key to national and local development planning.

Oil was discovered in the country in 1857 by the American Merrimac Oil Company (Furlonge and Kaiser 2010: 553) and by the early twentieth century commercial petroleum extraction was also significantly contributing to TT’s economy. Today, TT is one of the richest countries in the Caribbean on account of its oil reserves. In the years leading to Independence, this lucrative asset led to economic diversification as jobs were now available outside of subsistence and commercial agriculture – East Indians became associated with independent businesses that coalesced around the erstwhile plantation economy while Africans took up employment within the state-controlled oil and manufacturing industries (Sudama 1983: 84). The following section traces how this socioeconomic difference along occupational lines manifests in narratives of development.

CBC is the largest of the three boroughs in TT and is strategically situated in the western part of Central Trinidad between the country’s two cities – Port of Spain (POS) and San Fernando. It has a total population of 83,489 of which Indo-Trinidadians make up 53 per cent, Afro-Trinidadians made up 25 per cent and the remaining 22 per cent are of different or mixed ethnicities (Central Statistical Office 2012). According to Raymond (2004), CBC was perfectly positioned for the ‘import’ of young workers from POS through a type of suburbanisation following the construction of two highways that now link the area to the north and south parts of the country. CBC’s location has been instrumental in the development of the area – it has been able to take advantage of both ribbon housing and business development across the two highway corridors. The most recent census data consequently shows a 14 per cent increase in in-migrants into the region – the highest recorded in the last ten years across the country (GRTT 2012) – making CBC also the fastest-growing borough in TT.
My research took place in CBC’s main town, which is aptly also called Chaguana. The areas surrounding the main town continue to be predominantly rural with large tracts of agricultural land that were once used for sugarcane and cocoa plantations. Within the town, however, housing and retail schemes have transformed the landscape into one of bustling economic activity, so much so that I have often heard Chaguana referred to as the ‘bargain centre’ of the Caribbean. Today, the ‘market’ in Chaguana encompasses supermarkets, shopping malls, banks, insurance companies and street vendors that together form the economic backbone of the town. The local government is keen to capitalise on this pace of development that promises further business investments and the sustained attention of the central government. The aforementioned IGO was invited by CBC to provide technical assistance in this regard, and as a consultant on the project I was asked to conduct a baseline study of the socioeconomic and historical context of CBC’s economic growth. Part of my methodology involved conducting semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders selected by the IGO (religious and business leaders, community-based clubs, etc.) and members of the public about different aspects of development in the town – education, small businesses, community events, infrastructure and so on.

The participants for this study are almost all Indo-Trinidadians living and working in Chaguana. The reason for this is mostly time constraint. Interviews made up but one component of my project deliverables, and under pressure for time I resorted to convenience sampling (Bernard 2006: 191–2). As the majority of the town is Indo-Trinidadian, I was inadvertently interacting more with this population in government offices and on the street. Furthermore, my own Indian heritage had currency in this part of the country. Telling people that I was from India made it easier and quicker for me to build alliances with my informants. The historical particularities that link Indo-Trinidadians to plantation lands also provided a fertile area of enquiry into the relationship between person and place. My access to this group has allowed me to hone in on this aspect through narrative analysis.

Notwithstanding, this skewed focus represents an incomplete picture of how Chaguana’s economic development is experienced and perceived by its inhabitants. The history of political patronage that has characterised TT’s social landscape since Independence suggests a complex relationship of the individual to the state – one that is largely coloured by identity politics (see also Abraham 2005; Alvaré 2015; Hintzen 1989; Ramsaran 2004; Sudama 1983). I was not able to capture the diversity of voices during the time frame I was given; their integration promises a more nuanced assessment of subjectivities and practices that converge around CBC’s growth story.

Narrative Analysis

Narratives as Language

The narratives discussed in this paper were collected from both private citizens and government employees. From a linguistic perspective, I have categorised them across two broad themes of what was being said: narratives of enterprise that emphasised individual initiative, and narratives of stimulus that drew on state patronage at the local level.

1. Narratives of Enterprise

Ram is an eighty-year-old retired school principal who has lived his entire life in Chaguana. When we first met, he told me about the plans he had to fix the roof and windows of his house, which had seen some significant renovations since he bought it in the 1960s. For Ram, modern Chaguana has exhibited a teleological progression towards development spurred first and foremost by the efforts of the local populace: ‘Government didn’t develop Chaguana, it is people who developed Chaguana … Government have to maintain the street, the houses in the area. It is people, compared to San Fernando or Port of Spain, in Chaguana, people built their houses’. For Ram, enterprise is locked in the labour of the people. He told me that the de Verteuil family, the Lange family and Sir Harold Robinson all owned plantation land when indentureship was abolished in 1917. Between the 1950s and 1980s, some of these families sold land parcels for commercial development, others for housing projects. As land became available for residential construction, the area saw an influx of people from neighbouring areas. Housing developments in the area and the skyrocketing prices of real estate (land for building) were the result of the entrepreneurial activities of a few wealthy landowners. With the increase in demand for houses, real estate developed, followed by the construction of more schools and better infrastructure.

The teleology of development that starts with individual initiative is also reflected in Dev Prasad’s narrative. He is the spiritual head of a local temple in the town:

You would have had some commercial activity in Chaguana. And that’s where it would have started.
So from the surrounding areas, anybody wantin’ some commodity, they will have to come to these stores in Chaguana’s to purchase it. And eventually, I suspect, what would have happened is a marketplace would have been opened. I remember the Syrians used to walk the road selling their cloth and so on. They would go from house to house … even jewellers would go from house to house selling jewels … taking the commodity to them [buyers].

The narratives of Ram and Dev Prasad are similar in two distinct ways – they both emphasise a change of events – a ‘before’ and ‘after’, so to speak. Both speech activities also lean towards the human experience – what people were doing in this story plot. These two features – the temporality of events, and their human dimension – characterise these interview excerpts as narratives. In his study of development narratives, Roe (1991) suggested that an interpretivist analysis of narratives is as much an exercise in teasing out particularities as it is an examination of, what I call, their ‘stickiness’. In the case of both Dev Prasad and Ram, the enterprising spirit of the residents was a sticky factor in making sense of the town’s growth. They are attempts to separate the individual from the state in the development story of the town. Indeed, Chaguana’s sits on one of the two major plantation sites in the country. Even before TT became a nation-state, Indo-Trinidadians were living here, working the fields and selling their produce in the local market. Since Independence, upward class mobility has allowed Indo-Trinidadians to capitalise on their ‘outsider’ position within Trinidian society by appropriating individual accomplishments like home ownership and material wealth into communal success representing the economic success and social capital of the entire group (Munasinghe 2001). When viewed from this lens, narratives of enterprise infuse ‘place’ with identity – in Chaguana’s, with its majority Indo-Trinidadian population, people have made economic progress on their own.

2. NARRATIVES OF STIMULUS

For Petal, a central government employee who administers micro-loans in the CBC area, resident applicants in fact suffer from a ‘lack of foresight and planning’ in business development. For her, government stimulus in the form of training and mentorship was integral to the town’s economic aspirations:

They [loan applicants] may come to the training and just go through the motions. But you know their education level is not that high so that they might really benefit from it. The training that will help is mostly about keeping the ledger. ‘Do you keep your receipts?’ ‘Yes, I have a bag of receipts.’ ‘Alright, get a copy book and write in it. By the end of the day, you might know how much you made in the day.’ But most of the time people don’t have time to jot things down all the time. So you have to make it simple for people, and help them out too. If they forget two or three things, that’s ok …

The market, according to Petal, is saturated with undifferentiated small businesses that are centred on food, clothing, soft furnishings and landscaping; she expressed unhappiness at the lack of innovative small business ideas in spite of having state funds to support small businesses. Tamara works for another central government agency that administers small-business grants in Chaguana’s. She had a similar story to tell:

To me, this problem is one that seems to come from way back, our legacy as a post-colonial society and our experiences as ex-slaves and indentured people, and how we’ve been ‘conscientised’ because of our experiences that have been passed on into believing that people owe us something and I do not need to do anything because you owe me that much … What we’ve been finding is that people, for whatever reason, are saying they’re in a state of poverty but still not prepared to work hard to get out of poverty. That’s a phenomenon that eludes my understanding. If we offer the training alone, we’ll find that they [grant applicants] will come to the training, but to move past the training into entrepreneurial development, that entrepreneurial spirit, that entrepreneurial drive, that just does not seem to be there and, god help me, I can’t put my finger on how we can get past that.

Almost two years before these interviews, in October 2011, the People’s Partnership government released a medium-term policy document, Innovation for Lasting Prosperity, in which the government identified five ‘growth poles’ across the country that would get targeted support for social and economic development; CBC in Central Trinidad was one of them. In this document it was also noted – ‘Government will move to re-align the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Sector (MSE) with the aim of expanding the country’s entrepreneurial capability. Expansion of the Sector is part of an overall Competitive Business Sector Strategy’ (GRIT 2011: 68). Narratives of stimulus align with this vision of the central government to facilitate local development by stimulating entrepreneurship. ‘Development’ in twenty-first-century Chaguana’s was being defined within the confines of what the ‘strengths, cultures, pathologies’ (Li 2007: 232) of the MSE sector were. Both sets of narratives – narratives of enterprise and stimulus – reveal selective constructions and reconstructions of CBC’s growth story.
Private initiative in narratives of enterprise is interpreted as a habitus of dependency in narratives of stimulus precisely because narrativisation allows narrators to focus selectively on characters and events to create their own coherent plots.

However, the reality of administratively and financially weak local governments in an economically booming town was not lost on public servants:

If I [local government] cannot have a say, if I cannot make a determination of where I go as a city, as a municipality, as my own decision, where am I going to make that decision? ... It perpetuates the problem of helplessness in communities and perpetuates the thinking that I do not have a say, I do not have a responsibility because it is left up to Central Government to do it for me. (Tamara pers. comm. 2013)

This narrative reveals the contrary context of development as understood by the narrator – weak entrepreneurial spirit in the marketplace, and a weak local government to manage the problem. It is for this reason that Danielle, who monitors local governance in Trinidad, believes the presence of the IGO would accelerate implementation of development projects in the area. She said to me,

The people who work in local government, they sign for the job, put their names on the timesheet and they disappear. I would say that is the highest paid worker in the country. Because it means they’re paid 80 to 120 TTD and if they’re skilled people, it’s 300 TTD or whatever, for really doing only one hour’s work. So the problem is management ... It [IGO] can hire specialised staff on contract who must deliver ... who would go out and mobilise communities. ... So that is the answer ... and out of that would be new dimensions of development to emerge.

In all the above narratives, sustained economic growth in CBC requires the presence of a facilitator – be it the central government or the IGO. Local government was largely left out of the narratives I collected in Chaguanas; when mentioned, it was to highlight its shortcomings in stimulating local growth. For development planners, this is revealing information as it suggests that although the local government is a stakeholder in local development planning (remember, the IGO provides technical assistance to the local government on development projects), it is not perceived to be an important player at the local level.

Narratives as Metaphors

CBC is characteristically an Indo-Trinidadian borough replete with temples, Hindu schools and Indian handicraft exhibitions. For both Ram and Dev Prasad who we met earlier, it was not just any people who contributed to Chaguanas’ success; it was the Indo-Trinidadian community in particular. ‘By and large,’ Ram said to me, ‘Indians are not war-like, [they are] more peace-loving people. Negroes ... they don’t like to work, to sacrifice and so on’. When I asked him why he thought Indo-Trinidadians were hard working, he said:

I always feel with the Indians, from indentureship to now, what really helped us is the cow. I believe our forefathers brought the cow from India. In those days you have open land and you have grass. Now when you have a cow and she gives birth to a young calf, you have milk. If you can’t sell the milk, make dahi [yogurt] ... and if the dahi ain’t sell, you make ghee [clarified butter]. So you see, with the cow you had these two things, then if you cut grass and you make a heap of manure and you plant a little bōdi [beans] or baigan [eggplant] or tomato, you fertilise the land and get good return for your crop. So I always tell, my friend, the cow was a great asset.

The cow, in Ram’s narrative, lent coherence to his story on what makes Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians culturally different. For Ram, hard work indexed Indian-ness and the cow was an embodiment of hard work because of the many products diligent people could extract from the animal. Generally considered a docile animal, the cow also stood for ‘peace-loving’ as opposed to ‘war-like’, which Ram associated with the Afro-Trinidadian culture.

Similarly, Dev Prasad invoked the cultural differences between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian communities in his narrative of Chaguanas’ prosperity:

I will tell you something. This is not a racist statement but everybody in Trinidad knows that the Indian community in Trinidad pays a very high emphasis on education. The parents will make all the sacrifices to make sure that the children go to school and for the simple reason, getting out of the poverty cycle ... For example, I come from a family of nine ... they [parents] made a lot of sacrifices, but they made sure that their sons went to school. The sons accepted the education and they were able to improve themselves. You can’t underscore that importance ... so you have that kind of development ... The only way to get them [Afro-Trinidadians] out of poverty is education and like I said earlier on, with the Afro-Trinidadians, masses do not take to education. The opportunity is there but they don’t accept it.

For Dev Prasad, it is not access to education but appreciation of education that differentiates the two ethnic groups. In his mind, attitude towards education is a cultural characteristic that has successfully brought...
one group out of poverty and kept the other still in it. Notwithstanding, both narratives reveal institutional biases against the Afro-Trinidadian community – eerie reflections of plantation narratives propounded by British colonisers that pitted the ‘negro mentality’ of Africans against the ‘industrious’, ‘culturally saturated’ Indo-Trinidadian peoples (Munasinghe 2001: 16). Indeed, an Indo-Trinidadian fruit vendor who worked close to my apartment in Chaguanas also confided in me that he feared the town’s economic future was being ‘threatened’ because ‘dem negro are lazy’.

This undercurrent of racialisation in narratives of development was also reflected in Shannon’s story. Shannon, who is of mixed ethnicity (her grandmother was Indian and grandfather African), oversees a non-governmental programme for rural women. In her experience, it is the business-oriented ‘culture’ that has made Indo-Trinidadians successful in Chaguanas:

From a business perspective, and here we use the word ‘culture’ … we have seen the Indians have a capacity for getting into business …. They know how to start small, so you don’t have to train them to do that. They also know how to save a little and get into business and use the profits from the business to save and grow. I think it’s the culture they came from [in] India … therefore you have the business bustling in Chaguanas.

According to Baroni (2014: 1), ‘tellability’, as a characteristic feature of narratives, ‘is dependent on the nature of specific incidents judged by storytellers to be significant or surprising and worthy of being reported in specific contexts, thus conferring a “point” on the story’. In all three narratives listed above, historicising culture as something Indo-Trinidadians ‘brought with them’ was relayed as integral to the context of CBC’s economic progress.

Analytically, however, these narratives reveal how the maintenance of Indo-Trinidadian identity is fundamentally a reflective process that is shaped ‘on the basis of, in the context of, even on the ruins of, a legacy of the past and coexisting present identities’ (Massey 1995: 286). Ethnicity during the colonial period depended on an ‘invented history with reference to the position of groups in the occupational structure and their supposed economic suitability’ (Yelvington 1995: 139). The stereotyping of Africans as luxury loving and free-spending was an active effort by plantation owners to equate the black phenotype with the cultural idiom of laziness (Munasinghe 2001). This allowed them to demand ‘more industrious’ workers in the form of indentured labourers when slavery was abolished. However, ethnicity – as Barth has cautioned – is in reality less about cultural traits and shared norms than what is socially effective (1998: 13; emphasis added). Ethnic identity is about creating and maintaining social relationships that could in fact be independent of the group’s properties.

Similarly, in his research on the cultural categories of ‘easternness’ and ‘westernness’ in Germany, Boyer asserts that identity formation is a product of ‘dynamic settlements of social knowledge that must be sedimented through multiple recursive operations of articulation, accreditation, and dissemination’ (2000: 460). In practice, narratives of development are exercises in identity consolidation that coalesce around state ideals of entrepreneurship and individualism. Back in 2007, Prime Minister Patrick Manning promoted the neoliberal ideal of ‘participatory development’ as his vision of partnership between the state and civil society. He emphasised that the government was just one of many ‘stakeholders’ that by itself lacked ‘the critical mass necessary to support a development effort alone’ (GRTT 2005: 15). The resilience of narratives that emphasise the business-like cultural traits of Indo-Trinidadians reflects twenty-first-century configurations of identity along a new neoliberal paradigm.

**Narratives as Knowledge**

Place and person are equally prominent in the construction of narratives around Chaguanas’ growth. The town is located in one of the country’s two major plantation sites. When East Indian indentured labourers replaced African slaves on these lands, it resulted in a default monopoly of East Indians in the area when the country gained its independence. Narratives emerging from this group have become sources of knowledge borne off experiences living, working and observing the transformation of the area from an erstwhile plantation site to a bustling hive of economic activity. Dev Prasad’s recollection of Syrian cloth sellers taking their wares door to door embodies that type of knowledge; it is part of a collective memory of Chaguanas that once was. For him, history coupled with individual agency has enabled the borough to thrive as a retail hub today. Ram’s narrative of development from the time he was a lad playing in the plantation fields is similarly saturated with historical accounts – which plantation families owned lands around Chaguanas, how the land was parcelled off and sold, the building of houses, and now the expansion of malls in the area. His recollection is as much a ‘lived memory’ (Halbwachs 1992) as it is a treasure-trove of information.

For public servants working with MSE entrepreneurs, the inability of loan/grant applicants to follow through with trainings and paperwork was part of
their knowledge-network of why micro-businesses in the community are not the golden key to economic prosperity. Petal’s lament of the lack of innovative business ideas and Shannon’s experience with enterprising Indo-Trinidadian rural women are equally valid representations based on experiential knowledge of what works and does not work within the MSE sector. These narratives reflect tacit knowledge based on practice (Dodge et al. 2005: 291). The rapid expansion that the borough’s inhabitants have witnessed over the last thirty years is experienced, resisted and appropriated through the use of narratives that allow narrators to make sense of multiple economic, social and political realities around them.

Conclusion

Using the framework of narrative enquiry put forth by Dodge et al. (2005), this article points to the multi-layered relevance of narratives collected from private citizens and public officials around how they perceive CBC’s rapid economic growth, and to whom or to what they attribute this phenomenon. The various interpretations of development through the lens of language, metaphor and knowledge reveal deep patterns of socialisation, ways of thinking and talking about Indian culture in the twenty-first-century that belie their historical rootedness in plantation discourse.

First, I characterised narratives as language into two themes – narratives of enterprise and narratives of stimulus. This thematic organisation reveals fundamental differences in how narrators use stories to explain economic growth in Chaguanas. ‘Enterprise’ and ‘stimulus’ are two sides of the same development story. Both revolve around the context of ‘initiative’ – who has it, who does not. The narratives differ in how initiative is inserted into a sequence of events contributing to Chaguanas’ development story – the history of indentureship, place-making, government assistance and the Indian ‘ethos’ all intertwine to reveal the political, economic and social complexities that underwrite how Indo-Trinidadians make sense of their world.

This article has also highlighted the potency of narratives as metaphor. Narrative enquiry reveals how story structures about Chaguanas allow Indo-Trinidadians to incorporate their historical identity as ‘outsider’ indentured labourers into a type of ‘layering’ (Massey 1995) of plantation and neoliberal dimensions. References to ‘hard work’, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘business’ become markers of ethnic difference between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians. Narratives are epistemologically significant because they reveal that ‘stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives’ (Bell 2002: 208). In this way, narratives also become tools in the production of social knowledge that, in twenty-first-century TT, congeal Indo-Trinidadian identity around metaphors of labour and labouring. By locating themselves in the narratives of development, narrators contribute much to knowledge construction about CBC while also bearing witness to ‘the impact of the experience [of economic growth] itself’ (Bell 2002: 209).

IGOs, on account of having ‘inter-national’ status (Campbell and Hushagen 2002: 22) face a tension in their dual purpose of representation – balancing the political interests of a single government with the interests of the IGO as a whole (ibid.). When operating within a country, tight deadlines, finite resources and an expat-headed staff often leave IGOs susceptible to de-contextualised assessments of sociopolitical realities on the ground. That said, their role in development planning is significant when one considers their position as interpreters of endogenous (community-driven) and exogenous (government-driven) narratives around economic growth (Fu et al. 2011). This article has highlighted some of the contradictions and similarities emerging from the two groups of narrators.

Local government does not significantly figure in narratives on the past or present trajectory of development in Chaguanas. For the IGO, this means extra attention needs to be paid to the relationship of civilians to their local government for implementation of development projects to be effective and sustainable. If the local government is not viewed as a key player in the area then development planning must also include public participatory activities like workshops, town hall meetings and community activities to increase the visibility of the local government to which the IGO is providing technical assistance.

The narratives collected also revealed structural biases within the Indo-Trinidadian community towards Afro-Trinidadians. From a planning perspective, this warns of the danger of perpetuating ethnicity-based narratives if development planning does not consciously integrate different ethnicities, particularly Afro-Trinidadians, from the region. This could be done by ensuring projects are also planned for areas with high concentration of non-Indo-Trinidadian populations within CBC, and by including local stakeholders of different ethnicities in the planning phase. Key narrators are bearers of local knowledge based on experience. Planners can integrate these different threads of information to accurately determine the scope and
feasibility of technical deliverables that often define the evaluative criteria of development programmes (Roe 1994).

Interpretivism in narrative inquiry emphasises ‘rigor that includes relevance as an explicit aspect of quality’ (Dodge et al. 2005: 289). In this article, rigour is reflected in the historically situated analysis of narratives that are clustered for patterns and similarities. In this sense, rigour is ‘an awareness of the types and levels of interpretation that take place in the inquiry’ (ibid.: 290). Relevance comes from the hope that the analysis reflects ‘local truths’ that enable narrators to make sense of their world, and their place in it (ibid.). As an exercise that involves actually speaking to people, narrative enquiry is relevant in that it is current; in Chaguanas, it is reflective of twenty-first-century ontologies coloured by history but cultivated during a period of economic boom. In order to develop robust, sustainable development plans, it is not sufficient simply to collect and categorise narratives as human-subject stories for an official report. Narratives are sociocultural products of place, person and time – their import lies in understanding who is doing the talking, what they are saying, why they are saying it and what is not said. For this reason, narrative analysis must be included in development planning and implementation so that intervention remains holistic, equitable and informed by historical institutions of social practice.

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Notes

1. ‘TT’ refers to the nation-state of Trinidad and Tobago. However, the context of this article focuses solely on the historical development of Trinidad, the bigger of the two islands.
2. Narrativisation refers to the act of creating a narrative. In this article it is used differently from ‘narrating’, which is simply the act of engaging in spoken commentary.
3. The term ‘African’ has been replaced with ‘Afro-Trinidadian’ and ‘East Indian’ with ‘Indo-Trinidadian’ to reflect the national identities of these populations in the post-Independence era.
4. Given the small size of the borough corporation, Chaguanas and CBC are used interchangeably to refer to the entire area of 59 sq km under consideration by the IGO for local development planning.
5. All names given are pseudonyms.
6. The word ‘negro’ in TT is used colloquially to refer to Afro-Trinidadians. Similarly, ‘coolie’ is used to reference Indo-Trinidadians, and ‘dougla’ refers to mixed African/East Indian ethnicity.

References


