

Race, Politics and History in a Survey of Contemporary Ethnographic Writing on Trinidad

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Abstract:

Contemporary anthropological work in Trinidad is largely focused on theorizing the racial antagonisms between Indo and Afro Trinidadians. Since the time of independence, political leaders have called for unity and harmony amongst Trinidadians, but individuals of all racial groups who utilize primordial understandings of race in everyday discourse to negotiate tensions and define themselves contest the shape and content of what it means to be Trinidadian. While a study of Trinidadian history shows that many of the stereotypes which operate in contemporary Trinidad have their roots in colonial discourses surrounding Afro and Indo Trinidadians, ethnographic work shows that these stereotypes have changed in response to various political and economic pressures, and that individuals utilize or ignore these stereotypes depending on context and goals. Further, Indo-Trinidadians have historically been semantically excluded from the lexicon which describes what it means to be Trinidadian by their exclusion from the term 'Creole,' and as such have faced considerable difficulty accessing reins of political power due to their exclusion from a sense of Trinidadian identity.

There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India;...There can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin,...There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties;...There can be no Mother China,...no Mother Syria or no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognize is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children. All must be equal in her eyes” (Williams 1962:279)

The above quotation is taken from Dr. Eric Williams, noted Trinidadian historian and first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago¹. The words were written in 1962 in Williams’ *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* during Trinidad’s final push towards independence. The quote is indicative of the major tensions of the country’s historical and contemporary climate, those between cultural plurality and homogeneity, between politically racialized discourse and unity. Taken alone, the quote can be read as a common rallying call by a leader of a young multi-cultural nation trying to define itself in the face of a history of often-brutal colonial rule. Williams’ words seem on the surface to be unifying. Other scholars, notably Munasinghe (2002:670), argue that the statement is indicative of one of the great ironies of Trinidad’s history. In one sweeping statement, cultural unity is touted just as a careful categorization and subsequent reification of differences amongst a population are made. These tensions between ethno-cultural unity and plurality, and efforts to define and delimit the scope of Trinidadian national identity, and thus the legitimate rulers of the country, are the most common themes of much of the body of ethnographic and historical social scientific writing on Trinidad. These tensions continue into the contemporary period.

In that vein, I will identify and discuss some of the most consistently pressing ethnographic issues concerning Trinidad in a context which looks both at the historical and contemporary socio-political and economic situation. After surveying pertinent literature, I contend that the most pressing and ethnographic issue in academic studies of Trinidad is that of theorizing race and ethnicity in the diverse state. I approached research for this piece knowing that conceptions of race and ethnicity are nearly always important ethnographic issues in post-colonial states. What I found, however, was that for Trinidad, discussions of ethnicity are not a secondary issue or passing historical remnant. Filtering through all aspects of Trinidadian society, discourses surrounding race and ethnicity and attendant stereotypes of various racial groups are utilized at high and low levels in disparate and shifting contexts by individuals and institutions in private and public spheres. Struggles surrounding political legitimacy, business transactions, and even interpersonal relations are often negotiated using racialized discourse. In particular, while surveying the literature, I found that antagonisms between the two largest ethnic groups, Indo and Afro-Trinidadians were of primary concern. Several of the authors concerned themselves with accounting for the reasons that Indo-Trinidadians, until recently, were excluded from political supremacy and also from linguistic inclusion in terminology about Trinidadian national identity (Munasinghe 2001; Khan 2004; Allahar 2005; Puri 1997). While the authors surveyed are unanimous in their contention that there is no biological basis for the categorizations of 'race', all assert nevertheless that Trinidadians utilize primordial definitions of race in their everyday lives, and these discourses seem to influence, and are influenced by, historical and contemporary socio-political and economic realities. This paper will also address what are locally known as "*Dougla's*" or "*Doogla's*", that is, those individuals who have mixed Afro and Indo Trinidadian parentage, as well as addressing the multiple uses and

It is possible to see this process of redefinition clearly through a historical overview of *shifts in racial defining* in the countries of Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana. The attention on 'shifts' helps in periodizing the rise and fall of identities; there is no inevitable racial persona or 'fundamental persistent cause' of racial identity. This perspective is a necessary corrective to synchronic studies of 'the social construction of ethnicity'. (Abraham 2001:980)

Despite their beginnings, these stereotypes have been used, augmented and politicized by members of Trinidad's non-white ethnic groups since independence.

It is one of the great ironies of decolonization that racial tensions have taken the form of horizontal hostility between blacks and Indians (the two largest ethnic groups, each with its own related histories of exploitation—slavery for blacks and indentureship for Indians), rather than vertical hostility directed by blacks and Indians *together* against the economically privileged French Creole elite, the white ex-plantocracy. (Puri, 1997:120)

This 'irony' has had longstanding ramifications not only in terms of relations between groups, but also in the affects to claims to Trinidadian national identity and political legitimacy.

It is noteworthy also that the two largest racial groups in Trinidad have also experienced something of a geographic separation largely based on trends in occupation. Though by no means a perfect split, Afro-Trinidadians moved earlier from plantations to large cities, embracing formal education, civil service and other professions at an earlier date than did Indo-Trinidadians (Brereton 1981:131). By contrast Indo-Trinidadians did not by and large enter into work on cocoa plantations or the oil industry in nearly the same numbers. It is

important to temper these statements while these trends are pervasive; this geographic separation is today more an assumption than a reality. Miller (1994) reports that even the rural town of Chaguanas, known colloquially as the “Indian Capital” of Trinidad, where Indo-Trinidadians are thought to comprise an enormous majority, has a nearly 30 percent Afro-Trinidadian population, less than 10 percent less than the country-wide demographic makeup. What is important, for all ethnographers surveyed, is the general understanding of these geographical or occupational ethnic differences to be true. Despite the statistics, and the significant changes since the time of indentureship, stereotypes of the urban sophisticated black or traditional rural Indian remain. These and additional stereotypes painting Indo-Trinidadians as greedy or thrifty, hardworking, backwards, and traditional, and Afro-Trinidadians as lazy, foolish, Europeanized, and lacking ‘family values,’ are common lenses through which individual and group membership are judged.

With the leadership of Afro-Trinidadian Eric Williams, whose quote begins this paper, Trinidad became an independent nation under the rule of the PNM in 1962. The PNM enjoyed support of the international community largely because of its capitalist orientation:

When the PNM was formed in 1956, party leaders explicitly rejected a socialist direction for the country. Its moderate ideological position meant that Western governments and international investors had nothing to fear if the party managed to assume control of the post-colonial state...for these reasons, the PNM had the best chances by far of succeeding the British at the head of a post-independence government. Britain backed the party’s claim to power because of its support for federation. Its ideology was consistent with the interests of international business. And its proposed programs were consistent with the interests of the local business

community even though the latter was represented by the political opposition. (Hintzen 1989:59)

Unlike Guyana, a country which serves as an interesting point of comparison because of its similar ethnicized voting patterns and large Indian population that arrived through indentureship programs, Trinidad's economy was thriving. Not solely dependent on agriculture or tourism, Trinidad is the region's largest producer of oil and natural gas. By 1939 oil was the country's largest source of revenue. The country experienced an additional economic boom in the 1970s thru the early 1980s with a combination of further discoveries of offshore oil fields and the money generated via the OPEC crisis (Munasinghe 2001:99). Sociologist Percy Hintzen (1989) reports PNM 'regime survival' was maintained largely through patronage projects directed at Afro-Trinidadian dominated sectors, such as the oil and gas industry, through programs such as the Development and Environmental Works Division (DEWD), which sponsored make-work programs for irregularly employed youth and young men. He argues also that regime survival was given primacy over positive change for lower classes of Trinidad, and besides patronage projects for lower classes, the PNM accomplished this through pandering to the needs of the elite classes (Hintzen 1989:73-74, see also Birth 1999:40). While attempts were made to use oil surplus dollars in patronage to woo Indo-Trinidadian votes to the PNM, the general consensus amongst many Indo-Trinidadians who remember that time was that the government purposefully excluded Indo-Trinidadians from the benefit of oil surpluses because of racial intolerance (Munasinghe 2001:101).

By the mid-1980s, international oil prices fell dramatically and Trinidad plunged into economic recession. Many individuals sought to leave Trinidad for the perceived greener pastures of North America. While individuals of all ethnic groups emigrated from Trinidad, it is important to note

that many Indo-Trinidadians sought and won entrance to Canada via refugee claims, arguing that they were victims of ethnic persecution in Trinidad (Munasinghe 2001:264). The PNM lost the elections of 1986 to an Indo-Trinidadian supported party that drew support from Indo-Trinidadian masses and those disenchanted with decreasing patronage from a now cash-poor PNM. The PNM returned to power in the following election, after the surprise results in the 1986, but subsequent elections have been near ties between the PNM and UNC and leadership has shifted back and forth between the two parties. By 1988, the economy had taken such a downturn that the Trinidadian government negotiated and accepted its first loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The subsequent continued slide of the economy combined with population demographics that make even strict 'race-based' voting unclear have seen turbulent elections since 1986. These tight races for political ascendancy have meant that in recent years, discourse about race, political legitimacy and national identity have become increasingly intertwined.

What follows is a discussion of race and ethnicity in Trinidad, followed by closer inspection of recent ethnographic work about Trinidad which draws together issues of ethnicity and nationalism.

Slippery definitions of 'Creole'

Thus far, I have used the terms Afro-Trinidadian or Indo-Trinidadian when referring to individuals or groups, but do so with the caveat that these distinctions are shifting and almost never refer to a 'pure' racial designation²². This is consistent with much academic literature produced in and about Trinidad. Locally, the term 'Creole' is used in a number of contexts to reflect the essentially 'mixed' descent of nearly all individuals in Trinidad of European, Middle Eastern, African and Chinese descent—though perhaps because they comprise the statistical majority of those about whom the word describes, those of African descent in particular, regardless of

fix the coordinates of self-other identity formation. Nor are individuals equally empowered to opt out of the labeling process, to become the invisible against which others' visibility is measured. The illusion that self and other ascriptions among groups are made on equal terms fades when we ask whether those who identify themselves with a particular ethnic identity could also successfully claim no ethnic identification. (1990:420)

In short, and as Munasinghe subsequently argues, ethnicity formation is intrinsically linked to nation building, to the definitions and semantics of word choice which impart notions of either inclusion or exclusion. Thus, subsequent sections of this work will detail the ways in which constantly negotiated and changing stereotypes of the two statistically dominant racial groups are utilized and employed by individual 'political entrepreneurs' in order to achieve their own aims of political or economic superiority.

In a country where it is often said that the two dominant groups have been engaged in a decades long competition for second place behind Europeans in a racial hierarchy, conceptualizations of the relative impact of Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians on the development of the country bear scrutiny. According to colonial ideology, individuals of African descent were perceived as better candidates for colonization and self-rule because of a misguided belief that they arrived in the new world 'culturally naked'. Fueled by ethnocentric notions of a weak and nearly animalistic, but nevertheless homogenous, 'African culture' which all slaves were understood to possess, Africans were considered to be something of a *tabula rasa* upon which Western ideals, religiosity, and systems of government could be imprinted. Indians, by contrast, were conceived as 'culturally saturated'. Already imprinted with a complicated (though still inferior) culture, caste system, and religion, Indians were not perceived by colonial rulers to be good candidates for maintaining a

colonial order (Munasinghe 2001:129-30). These initial judgments proved important in subsequent development of competing identities on the island. Competition for access to resources, and eventually political rule, were formed around these changing stereotypes. Primordial conceptions of 'race' were transformed into debates concerning which group contributed more to the building of the nation and were therefore more deserving of political or economic ascendancy.

Why the constant rehashing of terms for descent? In short, because Trinidad's diverse population has been subject to and engaged in constantly shifting primordial descriptions of racial stereotypes since the area was first colonized. Further, perceived fundamental differences about different racial groups are not a taboo subject of discussion.

In Trinidad, as in Guyana, a generalized system of beliefs based on the notion of fundamental difference between Creoles [here referring to individuals of Afro-Trinidadian descent] and East Indians prevails and is expressed mainly in the form of stereotypes...It [rhetoric and stereotypes based on ethnicity] constitutes a legitimate part of popular discourse unlike, say in the United States, where the emphasis on speech control limits race rhetoric to the 'unmentionable' (Munasinghe 2001:128).

Dominant in this rhetoric are explicit and implicit discussions of which ethnic groups are legitimate enough to both take leadership of the country and produce and control definitions of what it means to be Trinidadian. Thus, in order to complete one of the secondary objectives of this paper, namely to gain some understanding of the struggles for definition of Trinidadian national identity in the contemporary situation, it is vital to explore and contrast relevant ethnographic literature which address the creation and changing nature of these representations of ethnicities.

Indo-Trinidadians in a rural area of Southern Trinidad. For Khan, the theoretical distinction to be made is not about 'present-oriented' vs. 'future-oriented' individuals or collectivities, but a struggle to negotiate the tensions of living in a plural society by subscribing to definitions of racial purity vs. impurity. Working primarily with individuals of Indo-Trinidadian descent, the threat of mixing, and producing offspring that are not 'fully' Indo-Trinidadian, thereby increasing the risk of further marginalization of all Indo-Trinidadians, is of primary concern. Individuals utilizing discourse surrounding ethnicity serve to negotiate this tension between 'pure' Indianness and their actual lives, which are in fact much more Callaloo or mixed than they care to admit (Khan 2004:222). She writes:

Mixing is both unspoken bogey and voiced barometer of modernity and progress in a milieu where race and religion—cultural distinctions in Trinidad's stratified society and key idioms of identity construction—are two dimensions of experience most receptive (some would say vulnerable) to dilutions, impurities, and fraudulence. (Khan 2004:13)

What are the ramifications of this emphasis on discourses surrounding mixing and purity? Khan argues that the ramifications go beyond day to day living and interactions between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Conceptions of Trinidadian nationalism are also linked to these tensions surrounding mixing:

Where nationalist ideologies exult in civilizing ostensibly inimical cultural, racial or other "essential" differences through an ideology of harmonious democracy, tolerance and universal representation, a contradiction arises: the consolidation of group boundaries that denotes group differences and an erasure

of group boundaries that connotes group similarities (that in turn connote unity). Articulated and mutually constitutive, mixing metaphors capture the praise, the condemnation, and the ambivalence that ambiguous distinction and identities create. (Khan, 2004:224)

Munasinghe (2001) explores these issues in her ethnography as well, though she focuses neither on issues of present vs. future orientation, nor ‘mixing’ as Khan (2004) does. Instead, she focuses on the ways in which Indo-Trinidadians have sought to challenge long standing definitions of ‘Trinidadianness’ which exclude Indo-Trinidadian cultural forms through discussions of the national metaphors of Callaloo versus Tossed Salads. Munasinghe, like the other ethnographers surveyed, is adamant that all Trinidadians are ‘creolized’ to some degree, but argues that for Indo-Trinidadians, finding a space in which Indian cultural forms are recognized in a broad definition of Trinidadian national identity is nearly impossible. This sets up a frustrating paradox. Since Trinidadian national identity is full of metaphors of Creolization and being ‘Callaloo’, but simultaneously symbolic of a highly Afro-centric version of ‘Trinidadianness’ (with heavy emphasis on Calypso, Carnival and other cultural forms), Indo-Trinidadians both want to be included as contributors to the nation and as recognized as distinct from other groups, particularly Afro-Trinidadians, a group considered both culturally inferior and threatening. Speaking of nationalist struggles around the time of independence, Munasinghe argues:

It was not so much that Indo-Trinidadians...were anti-nationalist, but rather that their structural positioning in society limited their ability to create a viable and legitimate cultural referent for imagining the national community. Unable to compete with the PNM, Indo-Trinidadian leaders had little choice but to insist on their ethnic exclusivity. (Munasinghe 2001:222)

Munasinghe (2001) further argues that recent political victories of Indian supported parties are perhaps the result of successes by political entrepreneurs in the Indo-Trinidadian community to challenge long held notions of Trinidad as a) a culturally Afro-centric nation and b) a nationalism defined as callaloo. More appealing to these Indo-Trinidadian political entrepreneurs is a notion of Trinidad like a 'tossed salad' in which various ingredients (read: 'pure' racial groups) are mixed with one another, but still remain distinct.

In his ethnography of several different residential areas in Trinidad, Miller (1994) argues that the primordial or stereotypical distinctions between Afro and Indo-Trinidadians also set up false dichotomies given the amount of cultural mixture he observed during his own time in the field. Instead, he sets up a distinction between transcendent versus transient lifestyles. Transcendence, for Miller, is best understood when considering rituals such as Christmas, when special attention is paid to issues of constancy, ancestry, and traditional family values. Transience is exemplified in the Trinidadian Carnival, which thrives on change and innovation, freedom and disorder, or bacchanal (Miller 1994:82). He acknowledges that these categories, while not used by Trinidadians, may be read as a binary between stereotypes between Indo-Trinidadians (transcendence, similar in stereotype to Birth's notion of future-oriented individuals) and Afro-Trinidadians (transience, similar in stereotype to Birth's present-oriented individuals). Overall, Miller focuses far less explicitly on matters of race; rather he addresses class and conditions of consumption and modernity. He does allow that these aspects of modernity and consumption are often expressed and managed by individuals and groups via discourse which reduces these larger issues to ethnic antagonisms. Miller (1994:258-259) is wary of causal histories, arguing that depending on the way some prescriptive histories are written, issues of gender, class or ethnicity could all be utilized to account for the current situation and still be

partially correct. Both Miller (1994: 152) and Munasinghe (2001:140) take pains to note that while stereotypically Indo-Trinidadians are seen to have lifestyles that encompass traditional family values (or transcendence), closer inspection shows that in practice alternate family forms are just as prevalent in Indo-Trinidadian as Afro-Trinidadian families. This stereotype, however, is actively perpetuated by Indo-Trinidadians as evidence of their greater moral capital and therefore greater political legitimacy.

A survey of recent ethnographic work in Trinidad makes apparent that while primordial understandings of 'race' are commonly used by individuals 'on the ground'—ethnographers link these antagonisms to differences in lifestyles and struggles for political and economic ascendancy which have their roots in early ethnocentric assumptions about different racial groups rather than true differences. While not reducible to racial differences, individual political entrepreneurs and everyday people utilize racialized discourse to negotiate and mitigate conflict and tension. The following final section of this work will contrast these ethnographic approaches with the work of a few sociologists' work on Trinidad to sketch possible future directions for ethnographic research in Trinidad.

Conclusions and Future Directions for Ethnographic Research

Contemporary anthropological work in Trinidad is largely focused on theorizing the racial antagonisms between Indo and Afro-Trinidadians. Since the time of independence, political leaders have called for unity and harmony amongst Trinidadians, but individuals of all racial groups who utilize primordial understandings of race in everyday discourse to negotiate tensions and define themselves contest the shape and content of what it means to be Trinidadian. While a study of Trinidadian history shows that many of the stereotypes that

operate in contemporary Trinidad have their roots in colonial discourses surrounding Afro and Indo-Trinidadians, ethnographic work shows that these stereotypes have changed in response to various pressures politically and economically. Further, individuals utilize or ignore these stereotypes depending on context and whether or not their larger goals can be met with an appeal to these discourses. Indo-Trinidadians have historically been semantically excluded from the lexicon which describes what it means to be Trinidadian by their exclusion from the term 'Creole'. As a result, they have faced considerably difficulty accessing reigns of political power.

Miller's analysis points to some of the gaps in the literature surveyed for this paper. While Miller, like other ethnographers, places great importance on an understanding of Trinidadian history, he is careful to note that many of the antagonisms of daily life are more closely related to class and other issues than to a strict historical understanding of the formation of racial identities. While other anthropologists deal with issues of class in their work (see Birth 1999:151; Khan 2004:134; Munasinghe 2001:197-200 for examples), Miller (1994) is the most explicit about how class relations and processes of modernity and globalization are also at play, but hidden underneath racialized discourse. The current economic situation in Trinidad, while not as bleak as many other Caribbean countries, shows a great disparity between elite and lower classes. Sociologist Percy Hintzen (1989) comes closest to pointing out what I feel is the major gap in all of the surveyed literature, namely, the ways in which those individuals in positions of political power machinate to maintain/ensure regime survival. Hintzen's approach is primarily a study of political elites, and as such does not provide ethnographic detail about the impact of political entrepreneurs on the lives of lower and lower middle class individuals via their policies. Similarly, Allahar, another sociologist, focuses on the ways in which racialized discourse disguises class consciousness, "owing to the very highly-

developed racialized consciousness that exists in Trinidad (and no doubt in other Caribbean countries too), one finds a general tendency to minimize the importance of class as a political or even an analytical category” (Allahaar 2005:22).

This general tendency of theorists and social agents pointed out by Allahaar holds partially true for the ethnographers surveyed in this work. What neither the anthropologists nor the sociologists of this survey do is connect two dominant arguments between racial antagonisms and class conflict to a discussion of the ways in which everyday people are affected by the actions of those individuals who may not necessarily hold political power, but who are members of upper or moneyed classes. Allahaar and Hintzen do wonderful work in looking at the ways that class and power are obfuscated by discussions of race and ethnicity in what is essentially both a mixed and hybrid nation, and the ethnographers surveyed provide excellent analysis of the ways in which these stereotypes have been created and are operationalized in day to day situations, but neither group extends their line of interrogation further. Each completes their objective, but in my opinion, the next wave of useful ethnography will meld and go beyond the two paradigms. I propose an ethnography that might begin to address the ways in which the effects of the complicity or actions of the upper middle and elite classes in perpetuating stereotypes operate in order to ensure their continued economic success and continued disenfranchisement of lower classes (through action as well as inaction) are investigated. It is my contention that in order for contemporary ethnography of Trinidad and the Caribbean region to move forward the discussion of ethnicity needs to incorporate analysis of the effects of actions of the well-to-do classes upon those who are disenfranchised.

Notes

i Hereafter referred to as Trinidad, unless specifically discussing the twin island republic's smaller island of Tobago.

ii It is pertinent here to note that in much of the literature, 'race' and 'ethnicity' are difficult to define or problematize; many theorists use the terms interchangeably, and there is a tendency to utilize the term 'race' when speaking about the ways in which Trinidadians discuss differences in the population. This presents some difficulty in terms of ethnographic writing. In concert with the AAA statement on Race (1998), I, as well as all authors surveyed, assert that biological categorizations of race are unfounded. However, that is not to say that there are not serious literal and symbolic ramifications resulting from a popular mis-understanding of the race concept. For the purposes of this paper, I similarly choose to use the term 'race' when discussing individuals of Afro-Trinidadian or Indo-Trinidadian descent, but with a few specific caveats. On the whole, I am unsure that either term, race or ethnicity, is wholly appropriate for the Trinidadian context. In using the term race, I risk blurring my own academic discourse concerning primordial understandings of race with those of the myriad Trinidadians who, as shown by ethnographic evidence, do so on a daily basis. However, by utilizing 'ethnicity' I risk downplaying the very real effects of this racialized discourse and participating in similarly obscuring other important issues. Munasinghe notes about Trinidad: "in common usage ethnicity is only implied when members of the group define the ethnic, which is always their ethnic" (Munasinghe 2001:14). Ethnicity, like race, has myriad shifting and politicized usages, different uses may imply different things about legitimacy, supremacy in Trinidad. To use either is to risk being misread or misinterpreted. Therefore for the purpose of this paper, I use race, but with an understanding that the term is imperfect and often interchanged with 'ethnicity'. While most of the ethnographers surveyed for

this work utilize the term 'race', other theorists utilize 'ethnicity'.

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