

A Home in Disorder is not a Home: Examining Race in Trinidad and Tobago

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Among its neighbours, the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago stands out due to its ethnic makeup. The population of most Caribbean nations is mainly of African descent; similar to Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago is evenly divided between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Unlike many of the other Caribbean colonies, Trinidad and Tobago were not extensive plantation economies until much later in the colonial period (Paton 291). This is one of the main reasons why the country presently hosts a proportionately lower Afro-Trinidadian population in comparison to other Caribbean countries. While other ethno-cultural groups reside in the country, the aforementioned groups have dominated the landscape in numbers since at least the early 20th century (United Nations Statistics Division). Afro-Trinidadians are generally descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean to serve as plantation labourers; Indo-Trinidadians are generally the descendants of South Asian indentured labourers brought to Trinidad to fulfill the same role following the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. Trinidad and Tobago's long history of colonial subjugation has bred a modern social hierarchy highly tied to race. Racial categories centered around physical characteristics and created during the colonial period have been instrumental in the development of this social hierarchy. Its institutionalization within the country's modern national political system has resulted in persisting legacies evident throughout modern Trinidadian society. I focus on the island of Trinidad (while still making occasional reference to Tobago) and argue that Trinidadian national unity has been hampered by the foundations laid by the plantation system and consolidated by the modern political system.

The colony's plantation system was established by the Spanish, maintained briefly by the French, and consolidated by the British. It resulted in the exploitation of enslaved Africans and South Asian indentured labourers, with both groups coerced into vying for preferential treatment from their colonial masters. Because enslaved Africans arrived in the area before South Asian indentured labourers, the formation of their identity as "Afro-Trinidadian" occurred first. Despite both islands' favourable environments for agriculture, the Spanish and French colonists were more concerned with their other colonies, such as Cuba for the former and Saint Domingue (Haiti) for the latter. Britain gained control of Tobago from France in 1763 and of Trinidad from Spain in 1797 (Segal 40). At the time, both island colonies hosted relatively small populations and were not major plantation economies (40). African enslaved peoples were brought to Trinidad largely in the early nineteenth century (Morgan 249). Segal's research indicates that Trinidad hosted 10,000 enslaved Africans in 1797, with that number doubling by 1802 (40). Due to the nature of the transatlantic slave trade, Africans were often separated from their family members prior to leaving Africa and were further divided once they reached the Americas. Thus, it was not uncommon for newly arrived enslaved Africans to be surrounded by people of various African ethno-cultural groups (Morgan 249). Morgan claims that in the earliest stages of British rule, two thirds of enslaved peoples in Trinidad were taken directly from the African continent, ranging from Senegambia to Mozambique; ethnic identity disappeared quickly as people often married outside of their ethno-cultural group (249). Enslavement and forced displacement were instrumental in the erasure of African heterogeneity, replacing it instead with homogenous blackness.

Despite massive growth in Trinidad's plantation economy, African people's violent resistance to exploitation and rising costs managing the plantation system led to the abolition era. Paton discusses the drastic increase in the importation of enslaved Africans by British, French, and Dutch land owners due to approaching emancipation (291). Representing themselves as liberators, the European elite renounced its role in creating and upholding the system of enslavement and adopted a benevolent and salvific view of itself, thus erasing the contributions of oppressed people in achieving their own emancipation (Heuman 349). Subsequently, the colonies of Trinidad and Tobago, along with the rest of British West Indies, declared the abolition of slavery in 1834 (Pemberton et al). As a means of facilitating the transition between enslavement and freedom, British policy-makers believed that newly-freed Africans should be required to complete apprenticeships: forty hours a week of unpaid labour to their former owner for a period of six years (Heuman 349). As Africans generally opted to leave the plantation after ending their work period, plantation owners sought new sources of labour.

This new labour source was comprised of enslaved Africans who were freed while out at sea, Chinese labourers, and South Asian labourers. The largest number of Trinidad's indentured labourers were of South Asian descent; Heuman estimates that roughly 150,000 people left the British Raj for Trinidad (357). This migration can be divided into three main periods: 1838-1848, 1851-1870, and post-1870; the majority arrived in the final era (357). This new group of indentured labourers were bound to their employer for a period of five years, followed by a period of ten years in which they were required to remain in Trinidad (357). The use of Indian indentured workers prolonged the life of the plantation economy, with drastic increases in production and diminished costs (358). Unlike enslaved Africans, South Asian indentured workers were compensated for their labour; Heuman notes that that they were exploited in other ways, such as poor wages or the "pass law," which restricted an individual's mobility to their designated plantation (358). Similarly, to Africans who were brought as enslaved peoples, but not to the same extent, South Asian communities were subjected to a significant blurring of their ethno-cultural distinctions. South Asian indentured workers in Trinidad originated in different areas; as such, they carried with them different cultural traditions, spoke different languages, and belonged to various castes (358). Differences between people, whether among Afro-Trinidadians or among Indo-Trinidadians, were not significant to European plantation owners, who generally treated all indentured labourers comparably (358).

Trinidad and Tobago's colonial history has heavily impacted later eras, especially in regard to present-day relations between ethno-cultural groups. Unlike its various European colonizer states, Trinidad and Tobago has existed for a mere sixty years as a modern independent nation-state. Additionally, similarly to a significant portion of the Americas, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago have undergone a drastic demographic shift over the past few centuries; once populated entirely by the numerous Indigenous ethno-cultural groups of the Americas, many relatively-new nation-states are composed largely of non-Indigenous peoples. Both the Indigenous communities that persist and those that were erased have influenced newcomers to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago and vice versa. History demonstrates that the European colonists, particularly those of upper socio-economic status, were a highly exploitative and oppressive group. The Indigenous peoples of Trinidad and Tobago were another victim of the European colonial apparatus. As the Indigenous peoples of the Americas possessed physical

characteristics such as lighter skin that more closely resembled the European body, they have historically been ranked higher than Africans and South Asians in European colonial racial hierarchies (Khan 406). While divisions among racialized ethno-cultural groups may benefit one or another for a short period of time, ultimately, the European colonizer, particularly of upper socio-economic status, stands to gain the most from the breakdown of solidarity.

Although resistance to colonial rule coupled with the rising costs of colonial administration, eventually resulted in independence for Trinidad and Tobago, the legacies of European colonialism manifested themselves in the racial divisions of the modern era. Categorization into one of the country's racial groups was based upon an individual's physical characteristics; some relevant characteristics are skin colour, hair texture, and facial features. Much like other European colonial societies, an individual's racial category determined their perceived morality; additionally, people with the lightest skin were held in the highest regard, while those with the darkest skin were considered sub-human. There are several terms that are part of the local vocabulary that have been used historically and others that remain in use to denote various racial categories. For example, "Douglá" refers to people of mixed African and South Asian descent. In addition to Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian, such terms seek to categorize the country's population; however, there are several groups in Trinidad and Tobago who do not fit in the categories. Although modern Trinidad and Tobago prides itself on being a worldly and diverse country, the tendency of all groups to vie for representation and influence inevitably leads to division.

Not unlike the previous hundred years, the pre-independence twentieth century was characterized by fluctuating solidarity and discord between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Local anticolonial movements sought to distance themselves from the strict racial hierarchy opting to pursue a collective "creole" identity, referring to the country's ethno-cultural diversity (406). Historically, both groups pressured European colonists to consider their needs. The main issue was that when one group received more attention, the other generally perceived itself to be at a disadvantage. In 1884, the Hosay Riots resulted in a moment of collective terror for both Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians, after British colonial forces massacred both groups during the Hosay Muharram, a local Muslim celebration (411). The country has historically hosted a small Muslim minority composed of Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Tubal Uriah Butler and Eric Williams, two prominent Afro-Trinidadian political leaders, provide two examples of discord between the groups. They claim that Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians do not mix, with the former speaking of the 1930s riot era and the latter referring to the 1960s and 1970s post-independence era (Segal 305). Another prominent example occurred in 1990, when a group of men involved in the Black Power Revolt of the 1970s, now operating as "Jamaat-al-Muslimeen," implemented a successful coup against the sitting government (Maingot 530). Led by Yasin Abu Bakr, previously known as Lennox Phillips, the group took control of Parliament on August 27, 1990 (530). Despite the group's mostly Afro-Trinidadian composition, they had opposed the sitting Prime Minister, A. N. R. Robinson, who was Afro-Trinidadian yet worked extensively with Indo-Trinidadians.

Since independence, politics have generally been dictated by ethno-cultural divisions rather than ideological frameworks. Led by Eric Williams, upper-class Afro-Trinidadians formed the People's National Movement (PNM), which first won office in 1956 and led the country to

independence in 1962 (527). Unlike many of its newly independent neighbours, Trinidad and Tobago did not grapple with a major Marxist uprising, so Communist political parties did not receive popular support. Led by Basdeo Panday, the Left then opted to appeal to the South Asian population under the name United Labour Front (ULF) (528). Despite the fact that Williams' vision and governance centered on diversity, economic growth, and democracy, two disturbances would strategically challenge his administration. Riots in Jamaica, sparked by the prevention of Walter Rodney's entry into the country, and protests against discrimination by Trinidadian students at Sir George Williams University, both taking place in 1968, contributed to unveiling several domestic issues: high unemployment, emigration, and inequality, as well as general citizen discontent (529). Drawing inspiration from Negritude, Marxist-Leninism, and Cuban guerrillas, local student-led protests erupted under the name "Black Power Revolt" (529). They sought Williams' resignation and massive social and economic restructuring. Lack of support from the rural, middle-class South Asian population resulted in the quelling of the unrest by 1974 (529). Drastic increases in oil production and exportation returned the country to a more unified atmosphere.

A central factor towards achieving just national unity is ensuring that residents have reached a consensus. If a national government makes decisions on behalf of its people yet does not consider everyone's needs or the greater good, nor does it engage in practices such as community consultations, then there is no national unity. Instances of disagreement eliciting strong responses such as protesting or rioting serve as an appealing option for those who feel as though their voice has been neglected. Although the application of pressure reminds national governments to address requests made by their citizens, a lack of solidarity often contributes to the disintegration of progress.

There are several scales, such as the local, the regional, and the national among others, that are composed of officials, elected and non-elected, who collectively aim to best represent their constituents. Trinidadians, like people all over the world, are multifaceted and highly varied; the components which make up their identities are politically and socially constructed and intersecting (Sylvie 492). Regardless of the scale at which they are operating, people have agency to influence their own lives and the lives of those around them (Sylvie 492). Attempts at resistance and solidarity between ethno-cultural groups became possible only when people began to view themselves as active agents capable of creating change. Despite the visible physical differences between various groups of people, criticizing the social and political constructs around them further encouraged solidarity.

Despite the country's lack of national unity and modern racial hierarchy, some cultural practices have been useful in combatting oppressive colonial structures. Calypso is a popular musical genre of Trinidadian origin and a tool used most frequently by the Afro-Trinidadian working class to protest oppression by the European elite. The genre is known for having historically excluded Indo-Trinidadians; while Hindu Calypsos have existed since at least the 1970s, the genre barely mentioned the existence of South Asians (Holton 194). Depending on the era and its most pressing issues, lyrics have ranged from segregation, to racism, to exploitative working condition among many others. The genre traces much of its foundations to West Africa, yet also contains some Hispanic, French, and British influences (194). One of the most prominent eras in the history of Calypso was the early twentieth century at the height of British

oil production (198). The industry was greatly segregated with Europeans as a managerial class, Africans as labourers, and Indians were generally not present within the industry. The state did not provide any health and safety provisions to protect the lives of labourers, and private corporations did not provide labourers with proper equipment or a safe workplace (198). The workplace was segregated by race and class on the basis of attire, conduct, and appropriate behaviour while not working (198). Calypsonians have remained a tool by which ordinary Trinidadians could openly expose and criticize local and foreign elite. Whether acting as an artist or as a listener, the genre provides Trinidadians with agency and remains an important tool of resistance against neocolonialism.

Another example is Carnival, a popular Trinidadian festival taking place annually on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. Locals refer to the parade portion of the festival as “Mas,” short for Masquerade, during which participants dress up in elaborate costumes, sometimes including masks. Participation in the festivities was historically associated with exercising freedom to practice one’s culture despite government provisions against such activities. Although the festival traces its oldest influences to French Roman Catholic Easter processions, the incorporation of African people, music, and costumes added a certain vibrancy to the European Christian custom (Segal 308). Other ethno-cultural groups such as South Asian, British, and Spanish among others have also become influential actors within the festival. Trinidadian Carnival has been compared to similar festivals around the Caribbean and Latin America. Contrary to Trinidad, Brazilian Carnival prides itself on showcasing whiteness while restricting Black expression; Martinique on the other hand invests heavily to reinforce Black expression yet seeks to mimic French identity (308). Along with Calypso, Carnival is an important tool in breaking down socially- and politically-constructed barriers between the country’s ethno-cultural groups. Calypso and Carnival have been instrumental in bridging gaps and building solidarity between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians.

Trinidad and Tobago’s recent history has been dominated by its two largest ethnocultural groups: Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Although both groups have a shared history of oppression caused largely by a European colonial elite, the differences in treatment and level of influence throughout national memory has led to a fractured society. Rather than putting differences aside, the country remains staunchly divided between the two aforementioned groups, especially with relation to politics. While people come together during times of celebration such as Carnival and although a significant portion of the population self-identifies as mixed-race, disparities still exist in terms of homogenous communities; moreover, control over the government contributes to access to essential services and socio-economic mobility. Similarly to much of the Americas, Trinidad and Tobago is grappling with deconstructing racial hierarchies imposed during the European colonial era. One of the central persisting issues is the existence of political parties formed along and sustained by ethno-cultural divisions. Basing a country’s parties on ideological frameworks rather than ethnic ones would allow for the people of Trinidad to see that they have much in common with their neighbours of differing ethno-cultural groups. However, in order for this process to take place, it is essential that the preferential treatment of one ethnic group over the other cease. Generally speaking, Trinidad and Tobago has a difficult path ahead; highlighting that people’s similarities supersede their differences will lead to national unity.

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