



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Caribbean Masala. Indian Identity in Guyana and Trinidad by Dave Ramsaran and Linden F. Lewis

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Book Review

– *Caribbean Masala. Indian Identity in Guyana and Trinidad*, by Dave Ramsaran & Linden F. Lewis. University of Mississippi Press, 2018.

Fourteen years after Aisha Kahn's *Callaloo Nation*, again an exploration of the intriguing simultaneity of projects of distinction and processes of mixing that marks the (Indo-)Caribbean ethno-cultural reality triggers a culinary connotation. This time *masala*, the Urdu word for mixed spices, is employed as metaphor that captures the essence of this ambivalent reality. In their assessment of Indian identity in Guyana and Trinidad, American sociologists Ramsaran and Lewis—both Caribbean born—combine postcolonial theory and, more prominently, the notion of creolization to unravel the intricacies of hybridity and distinctiveness. Observing an undesirable African bias in literature on creolization, they aim to explore the 'contributions of people of Indian descent to the creolization process' (p. 13). Defining creolization as the constitutive Caribbean cultural process of acculturation (adjustment) and interculturalization (exchange), Ramsaran and Lewis seek to depict how local Indians are both absorbed into the mainstream—especially in a context of globalization—and re-creating creolized forms and spaces of Indian culture.

The book's *raison d'être* is the authors' desire to contribute to a question posed by George Lamming in his essay called 'the West Indian People' in the early 1970s. Lamming wondered how many texts manage to take us 'inside of Indian life in Trinidad and Guyana.' Ramsaran and Lewis seek to do exactly that. However, the themes they choose to address seem somewhat random. Or perhaps more accurately, it appears to be the expertise of the authors rather than a careful contemplation of indicators of *masala* dynamics that has inspired the book's mix of ingredients. Besides some historical contextualization in the first chapter after the introduction, this mix consists of themes like ritual, family, gender and modernity.

The first theme that is addressed is globalization in Trinidad. In chapter two, it is analysed how 'racial' identity facilitates the contestation of public policy that is enacted to further globalization. According to the authors, modernization and globalization are catalysts of resistance against cultural homogenization of groups who feel marginalized within the nation-state.

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Creolization, they claim, modulates the development of race relations in such a context of transformation. It could make distinct groups appear more alike but it also stirs the reinforcement of difference. The urgency of public expressions of ethnic distinctiveness in the Caribbean context helps to explain the persistence of religious rituals. In chapter three, Ramsaran and Lewis assess the Hindu practice of *Matikor/Dig Dutty* to illustrate cultural reproduction. Like other rituals, this public premarital homage to Mother Earth, they argue, is an important source of ethnic mobilization in Guyana and Trinidad.

A realm in which ethnic distinctiveness surfaces in a completely different fashion is the focus of the book's final two chapters. Both chapters, the analytical climax of the book, explore the way in which masculinity is defined in racial terms. In chapter four, the authors examine the gender subjectivities of Indo-Guyanese men. Their Indian masculinity should be assessed in its relation to the (perceived) masculinity of African Guyanese men. In specific, the 'extreme' focus of Indo-Guyanese men on family, religion, work, and industry should be understood as an effort to distinguish themselves from their ultra-masculine Afro Guyanese rivals (p. 116). Chapter five offers an analysis of changing notions of Indian masculinity in Trinidad. Again, globalization and modernization appear as conditions under which contemporary cultural processes unfold. And again, on one hand these conditions produce transformative tendencies as men for instance learn to accept the entrance of (increasingly) educated and ambitious women in professional realms, while on the other hand, they inspire the reinforcement of other aspects of Indian masculinity, in particular those pertaining traditional Indian patriarchy.

In the conclusion to the book, Ramsaran and Lewis stress the omnipresence of such coexistence of resilience and change in Indian realms in Trinidad and Guyana. According to them, this study shows the continued prominence of racial questions and identifications in these postcolonial Caribbean societies. Despite predictions of some, modernization and globalization have not eradicated difference. Rather, they seem to have fuelled the cultural variation and vibrancy that has defined these multi-ethnic societies since their inception. Contemporary local cultural dynamics, could and should thus still be understood in terms of creolization: as the outcome of 'a dialectical process whereby multiple changing cultures exist side by side, each reformulating elements within their respective contexts' (p. 151). It is a plausible conclusion to this 152-page long contemplation of Caribbean *Masala*. Indeed, the potential of race (as structuring structure) remains tremendous. Yet, there is something dissatisfying about this conclusion. Perhaps it is because the argument has appeared in literature on Caribbean Indians before. Or perhaps it is because, at times, it reads as if the study was a search for indications of creolization rather than an explorative examination of transformation. It would have benefitted from a little more analytical ambition. Although the book is informative and persuasive, its internal coherence depends on the application of this one concept (creolization) of which the analytical limitations are not so well

contemplated and not thoroughly empirically unearthed. That said, this book does offer a relevant and up-to-date depiction of the way in which the eternal ambivalence of cultural flux and persistence shapes the lived experience of still understudied Caribbean communities.

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