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Trinidad and Religious Pluralism: Sociology and Faith in a Caribbean Island

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The Caribbean Island of Trinidad has a unique history and demographic makeup causing it to be especially relevant to sociological study. Roughly equal numbers of Trinidadians are of African descent and East Indian descent. I started taking students to the island in 2004 to study the politics of identity, race, ethnicity, religion, and the legacies of colonialism. This piece focuses on exposing undergraduate students to the various religious traditions of Trinidad including Hinduism, Islam, the Orisha faith, and Christianity. Immersion in the rich cultural and religious traditions of Trinidad creates an educational climate and opportunities for teaching and learning like few other places in the world.

The twin Caribbean islands that make up the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago have a unique history and demographic makeup causing them to be especially relevant to sociological study. Since 2004, I have been regularly taking students to these islands to study the politics of identity, race, ethnicity, religion, and the legacies of colonialism. In particular, the island of Trinidad is more of a social laboratory than its smaller sister Island of Tobago. The histories of the two islands are very different as they only find themselves partnered due to a British imperial fiat at the end of the nineteenth century (Bereton, 1981). Trinidad, the island more famous for being the home of calypso music, the steel pan drum, and one of the biggest Carnival celebrations in the world is far more diverse and heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, and religion.

Trinidad's modern history, starting with its colonization, explains the cultural mix that makes up the island's society today. During the early days of colonialism when Trinidad was a Spanish colony, planters brought in slaves of African descent. Later, after control of the island had reverted to the British, slavery was abolished on the island, leaving the planters in a difficult situation. As the majority of the former slaves refused to work for their former masters for "slave wages," the British brought in indentured servants from India. The descendants of these two groups make up the majority of the population of Trinidad today. The divide between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians serves as the island's fundamental racial and ethnic distinction (Munasinghe, 2001). Religion, on the other hand, is far more varied, but nonetheless, connected to this same history.

The most recent data on the demographic make-up of Trinidad puts the Indo-Trinidadian population at 40%, the Afro-Trinidadian population at 37.5%, with 20.5% claiming mixed ancestry, and 2% identified as other or unspecified. As for religion, 26% identify themselves as Roman Catholic, 25.8% identify themselves as protestant (primarily, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Presbyterian), 22.5% identify as Hindu, 5.6% identify as Muslim, and 10.8% identify as other (CIA Factbook, 2012). It is not uncommon to see a Christian church on one corner, a Hindu temple on an adjacent corner, and a Muslim mosque just down the street. It is this rich religious mix that makes Trinidad such an extraordinary venue for studying religion, religious pluralism, and religious identity. Religious identity is closely connected with ethnic and racial identity. Even the political system in Trinidad breaks down on ethnic lines with religious undertones.

This is the unique environment that I immerse student groups into as I expose them to the various cultural traditions of Trinidad. For the purpose of this paper I will focus on the religious traditions of Trinidad and the varied experiences I have had in introducing student groups to the island's religious milieu. The faiths I expose my students to include Hinduism, Islam, the Orisha

faith, and Christianity. My students, like most American college students, have had little exposure to religions outside of mainstream American Christianity. I have found that exposure to the various religious traditions of the Island tends to be a big part of the experience that stays with my students long after they return home. Seeing students identify universal themes and similarities between and within the various faiths of Trinidad is always rewarding.

Hinduism

One of the most famous Hindu landmarks in Trinidad is the Temple in the Sea located in Waterloo. The history of Trinidad's Indian laborers is a history of religious prejudice and discrimination. Hinduism was seen as a heathen faith and marriages of Hindus were not even recognized until the middle of the 20th century. So too, Hindu temples were discouraged. When one man, Siewdass Sadhu, built a temple on land owned by a large sugar company, it was torn down. So Sadhu built a new temple hundreds of feet into the ocean. His determination is seen as a symbol of Indo-Trinidadian perseverance and religious observance. Today the Temple has been rebuilt, but remains on the site around 100 yards out in the sea. The mudflats surrounding the temple are covered in Hindu prayer flags, which are a common sight around Indo-Trinidadian areas of the island.

One of the most impressive Hindu sites in Trinidad is the Dattatreya Yoga Centre & Mandir. This temple and complex devoted to the deity Hanuman, has a giant Hanuman Murti in on the property that stands 85 feet tall. Hanuman, the "mighty monkey" is a popular deity seen as strong and devoted. The entire complex, including the main temple is very ornate. The artwork that is part of the temple is intricate and students are often interested in taking pictures. During one visit, they were told they could not take pictures because if someone had prayed to be cured of cancer and a person took a picture of where they had their prayers answered, the picture taker could get that cancer. My guide that day was devout Hindu and student of his faith. He took great exception to that idea, assuring us it was nonsense and not Hindu, but we simply respected the wishes of the temple.

One of the more fascinating places of worship that I take my students is a Hindu temple dedicated to the worship of Kali. For many of my students, their only knowledge of the deity Kali comes from largely negative portrayals in Hollywood movies such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gunga Din*. My students, however, are not the only ones with negative impressions of Kali worship. My Christian driver introduced me to this temple many years ago claiming the priestess at the temple was a relative of his mother. When I asked him if that meant she was his relative as well, he answered in the negative. Neither he, nor his brother would enter the temple with my group.

As mentioned, a female priestess runs the temple, which is unusual in the male dominated faith. The worship services include rituals and practices that are very foreign to most American students, including rhythmic drumming, worshipers manifesting deities, and the sacrificing of animals. I have only witnessed the sacrificing of chickens, but goats are occasionally used here as well. There was some local controversy last time I was there as one of the national newspapers had reported that the temple sacrificed pigs. This was seen as a huge insult to the temple, as pigs are seen as unclean. This is a good example of the traditions of another faith (in this case Islam), finding its way into this group's beliefs. In fact, the perceived betrayal of the reporter who wrote the story caused the congregation to be less trusting of all visitors. Fortunately, I had visited before and was known to the priestess.

The animal sacrifices are done quickly, to be more humane. The heads of the chickens are cut off swiftly with a machete and the bodies are immediately put in a barrel and covered with the lid. The head, on the other hand, is placed on the ground where the beak continues to move as water is gently dripped on top of it, by a worshiper. For some students, witnessing this was very upsetting, while others were able to suspend their prejudices and found it fascinating.

Another learning experience for my students was the witnessing of worshipers' manifesting deities. This was when the deity would come and temporarily "possess" the worshiper. The constant rhythmic drumming put several worshipers into trance like states, some collapsed, others had their eyes roll into the backs of their heads, and for a couple, the deities manifesting them communicated through them. When a worshiper would manifest a deity, the crowd would surround them, but give them room. It struck me as a very respectful reaction. Several students showed great interest in witnessing this practice, but as obvious guests, did not feel comfortable getting too close.

It should be noted that the practices of this temple are clearly outside of mainstream Trinidadian Hinduism. However, the temple prides itself in the fact that the traditions and practices they engage in are steeply rooted in their Tamil Indian heritage which was brought over by their indentured servant ancestors.

While there are *murti's* (the images or statues of deities) for all the major Hindu deities, this temple is devoted to Kali Ma. They refer to her as Mother Kali, and do not focus on the destructive aspects of her reputation, but on her maternal nature. The priestess manifests Kali and worshipers wait in line to hear from Mother Kali through her. Several of my students communicated with Kali this way, while others were uncomfortable with these practices due to their own religious beliefs. For my part, the priestess, while manifesting Kali, told to pray to Hanuman (the strong Hindu deity that resembles a monkey) and that he would help me get those parts of my life that were causing me pain straightened out.

Unlike the Hanuman temple, we were encouraged to take pictures in the Kali temple, but the students who heard the explanation as to why they could not take pictures in the Hanuman temple did not dare take any in the Kali temple. The one student brave enough to take one picture of Tanty and me together (with my camera), ended up needing medical attention for a severe ear infection the next day. Her fellow students were quick to point to the picture as the cause.

Islam

While less than 6% of the population follows the religion of Islam, they are a sizable minority with a visible presence. I regularly take my students to the Jinnah Memorial Mosque (Jinnah is considered the founder of Pakistan and was leader of the Muslim League). Indo-Trinidadian Muslims identify with Muslim Pakistan as the India of their ancestors included Pakistan. This mosque includes a private religious school full of children who are always happy to greet visitors. The leaders of the mosque and school have always been more than accommodating to my groups, particularly in the years immediately following 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is very important to them to stress Islam as a peaceful religion. At the same time, they are not shy about questioning my students' support for their own government's policies. It is always a great educational experience. During Friday prayers, we are not allowed inside the mosque, but we can sit outside at the large open doors and hear and witness the services. On any other day we are welcome anywhere in the complex.

These "mainstream" Trinidadian Muslims are quick to distance themselves from the radical group of Afro-Trinidadian converts that were briefly responsible for an attempted coup d'état in 1990, the Jamaat al Muslimeen. During my last trip to the island in 2009, a friend took me to the Majid-ul-Muttaqeen, a mosque and school where many young foreign Muslims worship and study. Suspicions of radicalism surround this organization as well. My group was told we were too "white" to be seen in the area.

While most Trinidadian Muslims are Sunnis there is a Shia minority as well. This group is responsible for the national holiday called Hosay. Hosay commemorates the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson Hussein. Although rather than self-flagellation, as is practiced in some parts of the world, Trinidadians create large models of mosques made of paper, tinsel and wood. The parade-like floats called tadjahs are used in street parades ending in the tadjahs being floated out to sea. While this festival started out as a Shia Muslim holiday, it has more recently become more pan-Trinidadian.

Orisha

The Orisha faith has its roots in the Yoruba traditions of West Africa, as do Cuban Santeria and Haitian Vodou. For many Trinidadians, Orisha followers are feared and the traditions of the faith are not openly discussed. For a time, these traditions stayed hidden in syncretic Christian traditions, but more Afro-Trinidadians are embracing the older African beliefs without the Christian facade. I introduce my students to an Orisha priest, or Baba, and take them to a site considered holy by Orisha followers.

During a recent trip, while we were on our way to the holy site, my driver, who had been instructed by my colleague at the University of Trinidad and Tobago to pick up the priest on the way, was very uncomfortable. He is a Christian Indo-Trinidadian whom I have known and worked with for many years. He took me aside to warn me of the danger “these people” posed. When we arrived at the holy site, several leaders of the community were there to greet us. They talked about the fear surrounding their faith and while it is unfounded and based on misunderstandings, there are advantages of that fear. The owner of the property told me “no one steals from my land, they are too afraid.” He said this with a smile on his face, clearly amused. He even shared a story about a man who cut his foot on some building material while walking uninvited across his property. The man supposedly got an infection and died. He laughed about how that story gets told and how one man’s bad luck is attributed to a misunderstood religion.

On the property we were shown the shrines the palais, where the worship services take place. Often times a worship service can last for days at a time. The religion described to us was one very connected to nature and very family oriented, nothing like the voodoo stereotypes portrayed in popular media. Olodumare, the Supreme Being, is often cited and greatly revered. We prayed together and had some of the practices demonstrated. Rhythmic drumming and manifestations are also common during Orisha rituals. The similarities with the Kali temple practices did not go unnoticed by my students, even though the two faiths have roots in very different parts of the world. Orisha followers in Trinidad will even plant flags, similar to the traditional Hindu flags, but with different symbolic colors.

Christianity

Christianity is the most popular faith in Trinidad, however, I do not spend an overabundance of time teaching about Christian practices on the Island, as most are much like what students see in the United States. The biggest exceptions

would be the Spiritual Baptists who practice a syncretic faith mixing Christianity with the Yoruba traditions, more purely found in the followers of Orisha.

Trinidad and Tobago is a fascinating and wonderful place to visit and study. Getting students to study abroad in the Caribbean is certainly an easier sell than many less scenic parts of the world; and being an island that is known for its music and festivals doesn't hurt either. While those appeals are great, the island offers so much more. The politics of racial, ethnic, and religious identity are part of the social fabric of Trinidad. Trinidad and Tobago calls itself a rainbow country to stress the diversity of its population. Most of the country's official pronouncements include references to inclusion, partly due to the colonial history of racial, ethnic, and religious exclusion. The national motto is "Together we aspire, together we achieve." For a sociologist, Trinidad is living classroom. Nothing I could teach in a four-walled academic building in the U.S. could ever compare to the experiences my students get exposed to during my trips to these islands. As a real world teaching tool, visiting Trinidad is a sociological Caribbean paradise.

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